

hold it against me

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Summary

“We don’t need some guy in a cheap suit and sunglasses following you around and exacerbating anything,” James says, placating the look that Austin is sure is on his face. “It’ll be plainclothes, low key. Just as a precaution.”

“Because having some random guy follow me around all the time in general is low key?” Austin asks, obvious skepticism bleeding into his voice. “What do I say if someone asks about it?”

James waves a hand in flippant dismissal. “I don’t know, Austin,” he says. “Say he’s your boyfriend for all I care.”

or, Austin gets a new bodyguard.

Notes

me: nobody writes actor rpf like they used to
me, throwing my hands up in the air: FINE I GUESS I’LL DO IT

with the utmost grudging love and affection to jess, who is solely responsible for me writing this (due to [this](#) gifset in particular), and the one and only ladyeggplant, who we managed to drag down with us and has been an excellent motivational sounding board. thanks for ruining me <3 cttc4e <3

anyway, this is all incredibly made up and not meant to be taken seriously. have fun! write more actor rpf!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Chapter 1

Austin's agent doesn't tell him what the meeting is about.

James hadn't even called. He sent Austin a Google Calendar invite for 9:30 that morning, time stamped from 4:37 with a string of exclamation points in the event title, flagged as urgent with three different reminder notifications toggled on.

Austin had blinked at it several times when he first woke up.

He's in the liminal space between projects, the rare downtime after filming wraps but before the press tour starts. The next thing he has lined up is still in pre-production and he isn't slated to be on set for another three months, which means Austin's current schedule is as barren as he can keep it, so he doesn't even have to rearrange anything before rolling out of bed and getting ready to make the trek over to James' office.

Austin drums his hand on the steering wheel, mind racing with possibilities of what could be so dire that he needed to subject himself to rush hour LA traffic instead of a simple phone call. He's drawing a blank on what would require an in-person meeting instead of logging onto Zoom—every predictable PR disaster that he can think of is mitigated by the fact that he's been downright boring in his personal life recently.

He hasn't seen anyone romantically in over a year, hasn't gotten blackout drunk in longer than he can remember. There shouldn't be any incriminating pictures, or videos, or salacious tell-all interviews coming out from the woodwork, because he's *careful*. He knows better, and it was never much his scene in the first place.

Austin is left wondering as he crawls along freeway, as he parks his car in the agency's garage, as he walks the practiced route through the maze of hallways up to James' office.

The door is open when Austin walks up, and James isn't alone.

"Austin!" James stands up from his desk when Austin lingers in the doorway. "Thanks for coming on such short notice. Please, close the door."

Austin hears the door latch, a definitive sound in the now-quiet corner

office. He slumps down in one of the plush chairs facing James' desk, casting a sidelong glance at the guy occupying the chair beside him. He looks like a retired cop, somewhere in his early fifties with shoulders straining at the seams of his suit jacket. His close-cropped hair makes him look like a caricature, like an extra straight out of the newest procedural crime drama of the week.

James rests his elbows on his desk and steeples his hands under his chin. "I'll cut right to the chase. We've received several threats over the past few months," James explains. Austin hates how little it surprises him, hates how resigned he is to the idea of death threats and harassment being something that comes with the territory of his job, but that ship sailed a long time ago. James bringing it up to him at all is what makes him sit up straighter, because if he thinks it's worth mentioning in the first place then he thinks it's more than idle.

Austin has known James since he was seventeen years old. He likes to think they have an understanding, that they know each other well.

Right now, he can't read a single thing on James' face.

"Recently they've started to escalate to a degree that has us concerned," James continues. "We're going to increase your personal security until we can fully determine the legitimacy of the threats and ensure that they've been properly dealt with."

Austin's eyebrows rise up into his hairline, but he finds himself at a loss for words.

"We don't need some guy in a cheap suit and sunglasses following you around and exacerbating anything," James says, placating the look that Austin is sure is on his face. "It'll be plainclothes, low key. Just as a precaution."

"Because having some random guy follow me around all the time in general is low key?" Austin asks, obvious skepticism bleeding into his voice. He's unable to stop himself from casting a side-long glance at the guy sitting next to him, as subtle as a lit-up marquee in the middle of the night, complete with flashing lights. "What do I say if someone asks about it?"

James waves a hand in flippant dismissal. "I don't know, Austin," he says. "Say he's your boyfriend for all I care. Your safety is the priority."

Austin does an even worse job at hiding exactly what he thinks of

that, and the guy next to him lets out a bark of a laugh, the first contribution he's made to the meeting in Austin's presence.

"Oh no, not me," he says, shaking his head with an amused smile. "But I've got the perfect man for the job."

There's another car already outside of his house by the time Austin returns. When he gets to his front door, he finds someone leaning against it.

His first thought is that James definitely had all this planned out from before Austin ever agreed to any of it. His second thought comes with a rush of relief, because nothing about the loose jeans and t-shirt covered long legs and lean waist he's confronted with screams *private security*, even if this guy's shoulders are broad enough to stretch out the fabric of his short sleeves.

Austin's third thought is that he's actually dated men significantly less attractive than whoever has just been planted on his doorstep like the most tempting kind of present.

"Hey, mate," he says, pushing himself up off of Austin's door and extending out a hand. "Callum."

As the accented voice hits Austin's ears, his final thought about the entire situation is that he's well and truly fucked.

Austin takes Callum's hand, palms clapping in a firm perfunctory shake. "Austin," he says, and Callum grins, mouth stretching wide into one of the most devastating smiles that Austin's ever seen. He is absolutely, one hundred percent, completely fucked.

He's been single for nearly two years now, ever since the thing with—well, it doesn't matter. What matters is that he hasn't even bothered to hook up with anyone in months, and now he's been hand-delivered someone who looks like they were tailor-made in a factory to the exact specifications of Austin's type.

Someone who is going to be working for him, who's only here to do their job.

Callum steps to the side so Austin can unlock the door, but he doesn't let Austin get much farther than that.

"Stay here for me?" Callum asks, but it's more of an order than a genuine question given the way he stops Austin with a flat hand on his chest the moment they step over the threshold.

"What, seriously?" Austin asks. "It's my own home."

Callum gives him a conciliatory half-smile. "I'll be quick."

Austin sighs, kicking his shoes off and hanging his keys on the hooks mounted by the door, but he crosses his arms over his chest and doesn't move beyond the foyer.

Callum's half-smile goes full-blown, dazzling and bright. "Be right back!"

Austin watches Callum walk down the hallway, from the strong line of his back to the careful way he's rolling through his feet, not making a single sound as he fucking *clears Austin's house*, because that's apparently a thing that needs to happen now. He pauses when he gets to the corner where the hallway opens up into the living room, body going still and eyes scanning everything in his field of view before he slips out of Austin's sight.

It hits him, then, the ramifications of what all of this means. James had danced around it, hadn't outright told Austin what he was being threatened with, but seeing Callum on high-alert and going to carefully check out every nook and cranny of Austin's house like he might actually expect someone to be there really drives the point home.

There's someone out there who wants to hurt him, and they're serious enough about it that now Austin has a 24/7 trained babysitter.

Austin pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a deep breath, resolutely trying not to freak out. It can't be more than five minutes before Callum is back, striding down the hallway with a casual tilt to his shoulders, and Austin breathes a little easier once he sees him.

"Right as rain," Callum announces. "Although you really need to do your dishes."

Austin huffs out a laugh, then pads into the living room and sits heavily down onto the couch. He rubs the heel of his hand against his

eye and feels the cushions dip down next to him. Milo trots up and bumps his nose against Austin's shin, tail wagging up a storm, and Austin reaches down to scratch behind his ears.

"So how does this all work, exactly?" Austin asks. "Like. What am I supposed to do now? Can't say I have much experience in the area."

When Austin looks over, Callum's eyes are soft, understanding. Austin wonders if he has to practice that, or if putting people at ease comes to him naturally.

"At events and public appearances you'll still have your usual team," Callum says. "I'll be around for everything else day-to-day, but you can just forget I'm here for the most part."

Austin really, really can't do that. "That's weird, man," he says. "I'm not going to just ignore you."

Callum smirks. "Okay, well ignore me as much or as little as you want, then."

"Do I need to, like, stop going to certain places? Doing things?" Austin asks, scratching at his jaw. "I'm kind of at a loss here."

"As of right now we don't see the need to make any changes to your behavior or activity," Callum says. He drops a hand down on Austin's knee, squeezing gently. "Don't let it take up too much space in your brain, yeah? Leave it to me."

Austin chews on the inside of his cheek to bite down any kind of affirmative response, knowing that it'd be a promise he wouldn't be able to keep.

Austin sets up one of the guest rooms for Callum, and for a week the only thing that's different from before all this started is that Austin has a very polite and tidy houseguest. By the time the weekend rolls around, Austin figures it's probably time to start trying to soft launch their whole... thing.

He's not going to say anything, not going to have James post any kind of official announcement anywhere, but at some point he has to start being seen with Callum in public in places more visible than taking Milo on walks, going to the gym and back, and quick coffee runs if he wants to start laying the ground for a soft-launch and get ahead of any other kind of speculation.

“Do you want to go out to dinner tonight?” Austin asks.

Callum has his socked feet kicked up on the coffee table, and he’s watching some soccer game with the volume turned down low while Austin’s been reading the same page of his book over and over for the past fifteen minutes. He raises an eyebrow at Austin’s question. “You’re the boss.”

Austin screws up his face. “I’m going to need you to not do that.”

“Whatever you say, sir,” Callum says, a mischievous twinkle in his eye that does nothing to dull the strangled sound that word pulls out of Austin.

“I’m *really* going to need you to not do that,” Austin pleads, because that way lies madness.

Callum smiles, lips stretching wide over his perfect teeth, and Austin can’t even begin to imagine all the things he would do without a second thought when faced with the full intensity of Callum’s smile. “Dinner sounds good,” he says. “Just let me know where you want to go beforehand, yeah?”

Austin doesn’t want to think about Callum pulling up whatever restaurant he chooses on Google or Yelp and scouring through the pictures to learn the layout, entrances and exits and blind spots. He doesn’t really want to think too much about any of this at all—about reaching out to hold Callum’s hand over the table, about leaning into his space and letting touches linger, about how none of it will be real.

The truth is it all sounds almost too easy to do. Austin already can’t stop throwing glances Callum’s way, taking in the ease with which he holds his body, like it’s a finely tuned instrument he’s been playing since he could walk. Like it’s honed like a tool. The casual confidence that exudes off of him in waves, from the way he rummages through Austin’s pantry like it’s his own to the way he sits with his legs spread wide, knee bumping against Austin’s thigh when they sit next to each other on the couch. Austin has had to turn himself inside out to become characters that were radically different from himself before; this should be a cake walk.

It’s not going to be hard to pretend to want Callum, because he doesn’t really have to pretend at all.

Austin decides on his favorite Thai place, sending the link to Callum in the early afternoon. Small but well-lit with an open floor plan, all

things Austin had never spared a single thought about before now. He's antsy in the few hours before they leave, like he's *nervous*, like this is a real first date.

He flits around the house, tries to journal, riles up Milo, and tosses back another calorie-bomb smoothie in his quest to put on more mass for his next role. He's restless and he knows it, and if the amused looks Callum keeps sending at him are anything to go by, Callum knows it, too. He spends longer than he should getting ready; he can't find his favorite shirt, and he frets over every other option that's available before settling on something simple.

When it's finally time for dinner, Austin doesn't make any overt displays of affection at the table, heel rapidly tapping up and down on the floor any time he thinks about it. The food is good, and Callum keeps making him laugh, choking on spring rolls and drunken noodles with every new anecdote Callum doles out. Callum's *funny*, and it's as good a night as hanging out with any of his other friends. Austin knew it was going to be easy to act like he liked Callum, but he wasn't prepared for how much he genuinely does. He's buzzing with it, his whole body tingling from having all of Callum's undivided attention.

After dinner, Austin finds the resolve to reach for Callum's hand on the walk back to the car. He threads their fingers together, and Callum's hand is warm in his for the briefest of seconds before he pulls away, stopping short on the sidewalk and looking at Austin with big, round eyes.

"Austin," Callum says, sounding conflicted, like stopping was a struggle. "I can't."

Austin squints at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

Callum runs a hand through his hair, messing up his curls and making them stand up on end. "It's not that I—" he cuts himself off. "I'm working for you?" he says instead of finishing his previous sentence, but it comes out more like a question than anything else.

"Oh, no," Austin rushes to clarify. "It's not," he stops, unable to outright say *it's not like that*. "It's for cover? James said—"

Callum blinks several times, brows furrowing as he processes what Austin means. He presses his lips together, mouth flattening into a thin line before a look of determination spreads across his features.

"Alright, then," Callum says, stepping closer into Austin's space and

wrapping a loose arm around his waist.

He keeps it there for the rest of the walk back to the car, hand burning a hot imprint into where it's resting on Austin's hip. It's a feeling that Austin is going to have to try hard to not get used to.

Despite how often Austin reminds himself, it's easy to forget that Callum is only here to do a job. Maybe it's because they get along so well, or because James has been quiet as far as any real updates go, or because Austin's only job at the moment is to work out and mind his own business, but things feel weirdly normal. Like there's not a looming spectre threatening Austin's life somewhere out there.

They fall into a routine. Austin wakes up and puts together something for breakfast while Callum makes a morning round of the house and the yard, checking the perimeter or whatever else he's doing. It's the part of the day that most feels like Austin's living inside a movie instead of just dedicating his life to making them, and an uncomfortable stone sits heavy in his stomach until Callum returns. They walk Milo around the neighborhood, Callum a half-step behind Austin so they both fit on the sidewalk. He falls in line directly behind Austin anytime someone approaches from the opposite direction, close enough that Austin can feel the heat from Callum's chest radiating along his back.

Callum makes fun of Austin when he throws sunglasses on and pulls a hoodie low over his hat whenever they leave the house. "You look like you're going to rob a bank."

"You're the one wearing all black," Austin scoffs, waving a hand to emphasize Callum's *everything*.

Callum throws his head back in a laugh, and Austin smiles. Wash, rinse, repeat.

It's good. It's something Austin hasn't had much trouble adjusting to.

"I miss my boy," Callum laments one evening, rustling the fur of Milo's tummy. Milo's tongue lolls out, mouth falling open into a happy puppy-dog smile.

"Yeah?" Austin asks, not going for any specific follow-up question, leaving the door open for Callum to tell him what he wants.

"Yeah," Callum says. "He's back home with my mum, don't get to see him as much anymore."

“What’s his name?” Austin asks. “Show me a picture.”

Callum lifts his hips to pull his phone out of his pocket and swipes at the screen, settling back down on the couch and flipping his phone towards Austin so he can see, their shoulders leaning into one another. “This is Golo,” Callum tells him, fondness overflowing from his voice and that half-smile of his curling up the corners of his lips.

“Handsome guy,” Austin says as Callum swipes through the photo album, and when Callum looks up, Austin feels a sizzle of heat shoot up his spine when their eyes meet.

“He is,” Callum agrees, not looking away from Austin. Milo chooses that moment to nose at Callum’s thigh, wriggling into his lap to express his disappointment at no longer being petted. “Milo and Golo,” Callum coos, putting his phone down to tangle both of his hands in Milo’s fur. “Bet they’d get along.”

Austin’s heart thumps in his chest, the softness in Callum’s voice and the idea of getting their dogs together filling him with something that feels a whole lot like longing.

“How long have you been in LA?” Austin asks, looking for a distraction and unable to tamp down on his curiosity, on the growing part of him that wants to know everything he can about Callum. “What got you into all of this?”

Callum gives him a wry grin. “Why does anyone move to LA?” he asks, clearly rhetorical. He drops his gaze back down to Milo, smoothing out where he’d ruffled his fur. “I wanted to be an actor.”

Austin raises his eyebrows in surprise. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” Callum says. “I’d done a couple small things back in England, and I was young and a little bigheaded. Thought, fuck it, might as well go to Hollywood and try it there. What’s the point otherwise?”

Austin resists the urge to immediately whip out his phone and look Callum up on IMDb, but only barely.

“I started working as a bouncer, you know, to get by while I auditioned,” Callum explains. “Stayed there long enough that I met some different people in the industry, and well,” he pauses. “Got more work doing this than I did callbacks, so here I am.”

Austin finds that incredibly hard to believe just from looking at

Callum alone, but he knows first hand how much of this business is about luck and who you know more than anything else. “Do you still want to?” he asks. “Act, I mean.”

Callum shrugs, non-committal. “I like what I do now. I’m good at it.”

It’s not a real answer, but Austin doesn’t push. “Been in anything I’d know?” he asks instead, nudging at Callum’s shin with his toes.

“Christ, no,” Callum replies, huffing out a laugh. “And none of it’s worth finding, so don’t get any big ideas.”

Austin snorts, knowing full well the kind of projects an actor takes early on in their career, saying yes to everything that wants you because you don’t know if it will be the last thing that does. “I think I’ll be the judge of that,” he says, reaching out to snag his phone off of the coffee table.

Callum’s eyes narrow, and the next thing Austin knows, Callum’s snatching his arm from mid-air, hand squeezing tight around his wrist to stop him. Austin resists, tries to get his arm back, but then Callum leans into him and pins him down onto the couch. “Nope, I don’t think so.”

Austin laughs and bucks up, kicking his legs down into the cushions for leverage. Callum’s weight is solid on top of him, thick thighs bracketing Austin’s hips, hands stretching Austin’s arms up overhead. Austin wrestles against the hold, scrambling for the upperhand, but Callum never cedes.

By the time Austin gives up, he’s panting for breath. Callum smiles down at him, smug, eyes bright and shining.

“Fine, you win.” Austin says, going fully lax underneath him. “This time.”

Austin’s trainer starts ramping up his workouts to twice a day, one at the gym and one at home.

He lifts heavy at the gym in the morning, max weight and minimal reps until failure. In the afternoon he alternates between mobility

work and bodyweight interval training for cardio, rolling out his mat in the back yard to soak up some sunshine.

“Are you just gonna sit there and watch?” Austin gripes at Callum, sprawling onto his back for the thirty seconds the timer is going to allow him to rest, gasping for air.

“S my job,” Callum says with a grin, lacing his hands together behind his head and leaning back into the lounge chair, his thin t-shirt pulling tight over his arms. “Bodyguard,” he adds, looking down at himself. “Body,” he finishes, nodding to Austin.

His stance makes Austin want to bite dark bruises into his biceps, but before he can even finish the thought, the timer goes off for his next set. He rolls over with a groan, pushing himself into a plank position and mentally cursing whoever the fuck invented burpees.

It's still early spring, so it's not even that hot outside yet, but sweat sticks to Austin's skin. The fabric of his shirt clings to his chest and lower back, and he only has ten more minutes left, but he's already thinking about stripping it off and jumping straight into the pool once he's finished.

Burpees turn into mountain climbers turn into lunges, all at the mercy of the timer, rest period dwindling down as he chases peak heart rate. Forty seconds on, twenty seconds off. Forty-five seconds on, fifteen seconds off. Fifty seconds on, ten seconds off. On and on and on until there's a puddle of sweat dripping off of him onto the mat, hands slipping and smearing against the rubber when he goes back down to finish holding another plank.

Austin sits back on his heels into child's pose when the timer goes off for the final time, forehead falling heavy onto the mat while he tries to slow his breathing down. He opens his knees a little wider than his hips to get more comfortable, arms reaching as far away as they can, fingertips crawling to the edge of the mat. He rolls himself up to a kneeling position once his heart rate has leveled back out and peels off his shirt, dropping it down to the mat in a wet plop as he stands up. He's already barefoot, so there's nothing else stopping him from taking a running leap into the pool from there.

He cannonballs in, as close to Callum as he can get without risking hitting the edge.

Austin hears Callum yelp while he's still underwater, and he breaks the surface with a grin, combing his wet hair back off his forehead.

“Dirty pool, Austin,” Callum says, standing up next to the lounge chair now, smack dab in the middle of the splash zone. “That’s just not on.”

“No excuse not to come in now,” Austin tells him, eyes wide and innocent. “I mean, you’re already wet and all.”

Callum shakes his head, but Austin can see his mouth twitching to suppress a smile.

“Come on,” Austin coaxes, dragging out the vowels. “The water’s great.”

It doesn’t take much convincing at all for Callum to kick off his shoes and tug his shirt up and over his head. He dives into the deep end with more finesse than Austin had, body stretching out into a long line, picture-perfect form.

Austin preemptively ducks under the water when Callum moves to pull him down, swimming away in a flurry of limbs. “You can’t drown me!” he shouts when he comes up for air. “Zero stars, terrible bodyguarding. Would not recommend.”

Callum only laughs in response, slicing an arm across the top of the water and sending a giant splash in Austin’s direction.

Austin splutters, eyes blinking out the water. It drips from his eyelashes, blurring his vision enough that he misses Callum wading closer until he feels two strong arms snaking around his waist, dragging him back under. Austin clings to Callum’s shoulders in surprise, fingers digging into slippery skin as his legs kick out to lock around Callum’s torso, and he doesn’t let go after they resurface.

Callum’s chest heaves with the effort to catch his breath, but his hold on Austin remains solid. Austin watches trails of water run off the ends of his hair and down his nose, dripping onto his lips. He reaches up to push Callum’s hair off his face, hand skimming down Callum’s neck as he untangles their limbs and floats away.

“We should go to the beach,” Austin says, treading water over to the wall of the pool. He puts his back against the wall and stretches his arms out to the side to hold himself up. “I haven’t been surfing in forever.”

“I’ve never been,” Callum says. “Surfing, that is.”

Austin turns his head, eyebrows rising up into his hairline. “Well now

we *have* to,” he insists. “I’ll teach you.”

Callum wades over to stand next to Austin, sinking down into the water so his neck can rest against the edge of the pool. “That sounds nice.”

“We can go next week,” Austin decides, already starting to plan it out in his head. They’ll wake up early, drive up the coast somewhere more secluded as the sun rises. He has a spare board and a wetsuit that’s a little big for him, so should fit Callum fine.

“It’s a date then,” Callum says, and Austin’s stomach flips even though he knows Callum isn’t serious.

Not for the first time, Austin wishes he was.

It happens for the first time at the dog park.

They’re standing on the outskirts watching Milo chase around dogs twice his size, and Austin feels Callum stiffen beside him before he even understands anything is wrong. He’s not obvious about it—Austin only notices because they’re standing close enough that their shoulders are brushing, so it’s hard to miss when Callum goes still.

Austin doesn’t look at him. He keeps watching Milo, pretending nothing is amiss. “We good?” he asks out of the side of his mouth.

Callum turns into him, knocking their hips together and smiling with a put-on air of exasperation. “Of course we’re good.”

“Be honest,” Austin says, matching Callum’s smile. He follows Callum’s lead and slings an arm around Callum’s neck, fingers toying with the short hair at his nape.

“There’s someone watching us,” Callum quietly admits, the light tone of his voice in direct contrast with his words. The fond expression on his face is a more believable performance than some of the A-list actors Austin has worked with before, and Austin’s throat feels thick when he swallows. “I thought maybe a fan at first, you know, no big deal. Then I realized he doesn’t have a dog.”

Austin bites his lip and tilts his head, looking up at Callum from

underneath his lashes. "So what do we do now?"

Callum tucks a finger into one of Austin's belt loops and pulls him closer, leaning down to nose underneath Austin's ear. "Stop me if you want, okay?" he whispers, breath hot on Austin's neck.

Austin doesn't see any kind of universe where he's going to stop whatever it is Callum is about to do.

Callum trails a hand up Austin's chest, palm sliding along his neck until it gets to his jaw, cupping loosely. Austin's lips fall open when Callum tips his chin up, eyes going half-lidded at the way Callum's gaze darkens, focus locked on Austin's mouth. Austin tightens his grip on Callum's hair, pulling at the roots, and Callum closes his eyes and takes a steadying breath before opening them again.

They're all pupil, nothing but a sliver of blue outlining the edges.

Callum quickly flicks his attention back to the park, head staying curved over Austin, nothing but a brief flash of his eyes giving away that his awareness is anywhere other than right in front of him. When he looks back at Austin and doesn't look away again, mollified by whatever he did or didn't see, Austin can't help but take the opportunity and close the remaining distance between them.

It's nothing but lips on lips, dry and chaste, until Austin sighs into the kiss. Callum's lips slide between his when his mouth opens, plush and warm and slick. Austin grazes his teeth over Callum's bottom lip, and the tip of Callum's tongue starts to tease along the edges of Austin's mouth. Austin is a breath away from licking straight into Callum, opening him up and kissing him hard and exactly how he ought to be kissed, when a familiar bark makes itself known at their feet.

Callum pulls away, mouth shining around his smile as he looks down at Milo, and Austin blinks himself back into reality.

"Let's go home, yeah?" Callum asks, still close enough that the words ghost over Austin's lips.

Austin can only nod in response, and he kneels down to clip Milo's leash back on his collar before following Callum out of the park.

He stays by the front door when they get back to the house, already practiced in the routine of Callum making sure nothing's out of place since they left. He sinks down to sit on the floor of the foyer, ruffling Milo's fur when he plops down into his lap while they wait. Once

Callum comes back to give Austin the go ahead, he disappears into the guest room with his phone pressed firmly to his ear, leaving Austin alone and reeling over what just happened.

Austin isn't sure which part is knocking him more off kilter—knowing with certainty that someone was watching him, or Callum's kiss.

Callum's up early before Austin the next morning, curled up in the corner of the couch watching a match on TV, all wild bedhead and still in soft pajamas when Austin stumbles into the room.

Austin runs a mindless hand through Callum's hair, tugging at the mess of curls as he walks by on the way to the kitchen. Callum leans back into it, craning his head up and putting the curve of his throat on display, a pleased hum rumbling out of his chest. It's a quick touch, there and gone in a blink of an eye, and it's something that's happening more and more as the days go by.

Callum is touchy, always slinging an arm around Austin's neck or passing behind him with an easy hand on Austin's lower back. They gravitate towards each other when they're both on the couch, getting pulled together like magnets even when they start on opposite sides. A brush of the knee, a bump of the shoulder, things that Austin doesn't even think twice about before doing.

It all feels like second nature.

He figures it's fine; keeping it up when they're at home alone ensures they'll still treat each other like that in public, when it's more important to play the part. It's a role Austin doesn't have to work hard to slip into, because he's not becoming anyone else, not really.

In the kitchen, Austin fills the kettle and puts it on to boil for Callum while he loads up the blender with his first smoothie of the day, scooping an inordinate amount of peanut butter, protein powder, and frozen bananas into the single-serve cup.

"Loud noises," Austin calls out, warning Milo of the oncoming sound before blitzing everything up. He rinses the blade in the sink and sets it out to dry then finishes making a cup of tea for Callum, filling it to the brim and then carefully balancing the mug in his hand so it doesn't spill as he heads back out to join him on the couch.

Callum's eyes crinkle at the corners when Austin holds it out for him, taking the mug into both hands with a smile, fingers brushing Austin's as he hands it over.

"How are you feeling?" Callum asks, blowing over the top of the mug before taking a sip.

"It's—I don't know," Austin says, tucking his legs up onto the cushions when he sits. He felt weird about everything all night, tangled up in a way he couldn't put a name to even when he tried to write it down. "I'm used to being looked at, you know? You try to tune it out, just live your life anyway no matter who's looking, but that's, I don't know. It's different from being *watched*."

"They're going to figure it out," Callum assures him. "It won't be like this forever."

Austin isn't sure how he feels about the fact that he wouldn't mind it being like *this* forever. It feels ridiculous to even think about—he's only known Callum for a few weeks, but it's been nice, having someone else around the house. He hadn't quite realized how lonely he could get holing up by himself during his downtime, until now. Even if they don't talk, or are focused on other things, there's something about knowing that Callum is there to bounce an idea off of or chat with if Austin wanted to that makes him feel warm inside.

They can talk about everything or nothing at all and it's as comfortable as their shared silence, and Austin's not used to that. The part of his brain that wants to overthink things goes quiet around Callum. He's never worried about what Callum's thinking about him, or if he's doing anything weird or awkward. He can just *be*.

It's equal parts exhilarating and terrifying.

"So who are we rooting for?" Austin asks, nodding at the game on screen.

Callum scoffs, overdramatic. "I'm almost offended you'd even ask," he says. "Chelsea, obviously."

"Oh, of course," Austin says, playing along. "My mistake."

"If there's anything you need to know about me, it's that Chelsea is the only football team worth existing, The Prodigy is the best band of all time, and there are fewer joys in this life than a proper fry-up," Callum lists out, holding up a finger for each point.

Austin nods solemnly. "I'm committing it all to memory as we speak."

"Good, as you should," Callum says, cheeks rounding out with the size of his smile. "Don't ask for my favorite film, though. That's impossible to narrow down."

"C'mon," Austin goads. "Top three?"

Callum huffs, taking a long sip of his tea then tilting his head to the side, making a show of thinking the question over. "The Parallax View, The Best Year of Our Lives, La Haine, Barry Lyndon," he says, before smiling a little self-indulgently. "And I mean, The Notebook."

"That's five," Austin points out, but unable to stop smiling in return. It's a fascinating list, not something someone who wasn't truly interested in filmmaking and the art of storytelling would rattle off, and Austin desperately wishes he could see Callum act. He wants to talk *craft* with Callum, get into the fine details that few people care about as much as Austin does.

He thinks Callum understands.

"Well, you're the one who asked for the impossible," Callum shrugs.

Callum's attention turns back to the match, and Austin uses the time to look up the band he'd mentioned on his phone, flattening his mouth in contemplation when the first result is an announcement that they're playing Coachella. He adds two tickets to his cart and checks out before he can decide against it.

"Still up for the beach today?" Austin asks during the next ad break.

"If that's what you want," Callum says, easy and agreeable.

Austin's mouth turns down into a frown. "You're allowed to have an opinion, you know."

Callum leans forward and puts his tea down on the table, angling his body towards Austin when he sits back, but he doesn't quite look at Austin when he speaks. "I know I'm allowed to have opinions, Austin," he says. "Some have even accused me of having too many."

"You're allowed to *express* them, then," Austin corrects. He flicks Callum's knee. "I want to know them."

Callum's face cycles through a few expressions faster than Austin can

pin any particular emotion on, but the line in his forehead softens out when he meets Austin's gaze. "I want to go to the beach with you."

"That's good," Austin says with a small smile.

"But," Callum adds, and Austin's chest tightens as he waits for Callum to continue. "Can we go somewhere small? Not crowded."

Austin nods, so much affection bleeding out of him that he feels dizzy with it. "We can do that."

The sky is only just starting to lighten into a deep pre-dawn blue when they bundle into the car, boards securely mounted onto the roof rack and a bag loaded with snacks in the back seat.

"Here," Austin says, giving the AUX cord to Callum. "You can put the rest of the match on."

Callum's lips press together in a small, pleased smile as he takes it and plugs his phone in. "Thanks."

The commentary serves as a soundtrack as they wind their way up north, and Austin doesn't really know that much about soccer—or *football*, *Austin*, as Callum continues to resignedly remind him—but he's just as entertained by Callum's lively and colorful reactions to everything than what's actually happening in the game itself.

They pull up to Austin's favorite beach after an hour and a half on the road, one of the few hidden spots left, a cove with a sandy inlet that Austin only knows about because he knew a guy who knew a guy back when he was a teenager. It's not as unknown as it used to be, a handful of other cars pulled off and parked in the makeshift lot, but it's significantly less busy than anywhere else they could go nearby.

The waves here are smaller than if he really wanted to chase after them himself, but they're the perfect kind for learning on.

Austin opens the front and back doors of the car and stands between them to change in a thin veneer of privacy, but Callum has no such qualms, stripping his shirt off in full view of anyone who'd want to look. Austin tries not to stare, kicking off his sandals and shimmying into his wetsuit so he doesn't keep standing there dumbstruck, drinking in the thick muscled planes of Callum's chest.

He starts to regret all of his life choices in general when he turns and is faced with the image of Callum halfway into his wetsuit, the top

half folded so low over his hips it's maybe only an inch away from public indecency. Austin bites down hard on his bottom lip and forces himself to look away, busying himself with getting the boards down instead of mentally mapping out the landscape of Callum's skin. Austin wants to study every dip and curve of his body, from the wells of his collarbones to the valley of his lower back. He wants to record every change in elevation, the rise and fall from his chest to his waist to his hips, memorizing every topographic detail until he can recreate every square inch of Callum in perfect relief in his mind.

Austin shuts and locks the car, tucking his board under his arm and shouldering the bag he'd brought, stuffed full with towels and snacks. He starts down the pathway toward the beach, trusting that Callum will follow without looking back to check.

He stakes a claim in the sand off in the corner of the cove, as far away from anyone else as he can get. It's far from crowded, maybe fifteen or twenty other people spread out across the long strip of beach, but he figures Callum will probably appreciate the distance as much as he does.

"I'm going to show you first," Austin decides when Callum joins him. "I should probably warn you that I'm not really the best teacher."

Callum's mouth quirks. "I feel like I've been led here under false pretenses, now."

"I said I was going to teach you, I never said I'd be any good at it," Austin says with a wry shrug.

"If I'm shit at it I'll just blame you, then," Callum tells him, digging the tail end of his board into the sand and resting his hands expectantly on his hips.

Austin lays his board down flat and drops down onto his stomach, suddenly becoming hyper-aware of every part of his own body under Callum's watchful stare. He shuts out the part of himself that wants to feel dumb, limbs going heavy and clumsy, closing his eyes and letting muscle memory take over.

"So, it's like this," Austin says. He gets his hands underneath his shoulders, pressing firmly into the board. His hips push down into the board as his arms push himself up, spine arching in a deep curve before he uses the momentum to jump to his feet, knees bent to ground his center of gravity.

Callum is looking at him with both eyebrows raised high when Austin turns to meet his gaze. “Just like that, huh?”

Austin laughs, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “I’ll do it slower.”

“Be my guest,” Callum says, and even though no one else is around to hear it, the words sound low and appreciative to Austin’s ears.

“Start on your stomach,” Austin explains, getting back into position.

“Yup, got that part,” Callum comments, nodding enthusiastically.

“Shut up,” Austin says, rolling his eyes. “You want your hands directly underneath your shoulders,” he continues, demonstrating the grip. “Push down with your whole palm as you push your chest up.”

He looks over to make sure Callum is paying attention, and the laser-focused stare on his face makes Austin’s mouth go as rough and dry as the grit of sand underneath his hands. “You want to arch your back as you come up, so it helps me to think about pushing my hips *down* into the board rather than trying to push everything up at once.” Austin tries his best to go as slow as he can, core engaged to hold himself up as he transitions. “You want it all to happen fast, though,” he says. “Especially the feet. Spring up and try to get them right under your hips, bend your knees low for balance,” he finishes. “Does that make sense?”

“If I say no, will you show me again?” Callum asks, and Austin doesn’t think it’s just the harsh glare of the sun that’s making Callum look heated.

“No,” Austin says with a smile. He steps off the board and shoves at Callum’s shoulder. “Your turn.”

“What if I don’t feel prepared?” Callum asks with a pout, but he moves to get down on the board anyway. “I think I need to learn more from my teacher.”

“The most important lesson,” Austin declares, “is that you learn the most by doing. So do.”

Callum gives him a lascivious grin. “If you wanted me to do, all you had to do was say so.”

Austin huffs out a laugh, shaking his head. He makes Callum practice

a handful of times, but he's an in-shape guy who knows how to use his body, so it doesn't take many attempts for Austin to feel okay with taking them into the water.

They paddle out together, and Austin shows Callum how to nose his board down and dive under the waves. Once they get far enough out, Austin straddles his board and Callum follows suit. He points out the breaks in the waves and the bumps in the water where a new one is building, and how to tell when a wave is worth riding. Callum nods in all the right places, and Austin is only marginally distracted by the water glistening on his skin in the sun.

"So do I get another demonstration now?" Callum asks.

Austin sends him a quelling look, but he drops back down onto his stomach and paddles ahead of the next decent wave he sees. He feels it swell underneath him and take the board, and he pops up, crouching with even weight on both feet as he rides it out. Callum lets out a whoop behind him, a loud cheer that makes Austin laugh, and he kneels down after the wave dies out before making his way over to Callum.

"So it's like that," Austin says, mouth pulled to the side in a smirk.

"Can you do that one slower, too?" Callum asks, widening his eyes.

Austin resists the urge to push him off of his board. "You're up," he says, nodding toward an approaching wave.

He watches the look of concentration slide onto Callum's face, eyebrows narrowing and mouth firming up as he paddles. He jumps up a little soon, Austin thinks, but manages to hang onto his footing as the wave carries him.

"I did it!" Callum shouts, throwing his arms up into the air. The momentum of the movement knocks him off balance and sends him tumbling back into the water, and Austin snorts.

"Not too bad for a first go," Austin shouts out.

They take turns trading waves, and Austin hasn't felt this light in weeks. Catching the perfect wave at the right time makes him feel weightless, and Callum manages to look more stable than a baby deer after a few tries, which is more than Austin can say about his first time surfing. The sun beats down, warm on the back of his neck, and Austin figures it's probably time to take a break. Rehydrate, refuel,

take a rest before going back out for a second round if Callum wants.

He's about to call out the plan when Callum slips, the swell of the wave cresting flipping him up into the air, limbs akimbo. It's an epic wipe-out, but there aren't any rocks where they are, so Austin isn't too concerned.

Until Callum's head collides with the nose of his board when he crashes down into the water.

"Fuck, oh my god," Austin swears. "Callum! Are you okay?" he yells, voice cracking as he paddles as fast as he can to close the distance between them.

By the time Austin makes it over, Callum's back up and holding onto the board, arms stretched out over the top of it. He squints at Austin, blood streaming from a gash on his eyebrow and running in rivulets over his cheek and down his neck.

"No need to look like someone just died," Callum says. He goes to smile, but then winces when it pulls at his cut skin. "I'm fine."

"You scared the shit out of me," Austin confesses, sitting up on his board and holding onto Callum's so they don't float apart. He leans over and grabs Callum's jaw, tipping his head up so he can inspect the damage.

Callum moves a hand to rest on top of Austin's. "Be honest," he says. "Am I still pretty?"

Austin chokes on a laugh. "The prettiest," he replies, voice gravely serious.

If only Callum knew how much he meant it.

The break in his skin doesn't appear to be too deep, but Austin wants to get them out of the water to take a better look. Blood keeps seeping out of it, but it's not gushing; he's confident it looks worse than it actually is, exacerbated by the location and Callum's damp skin. The sight of him still forms a pit in Austin's stomach, gripped with the reality that it *could* have been worse.

All of the sudden all he wants to do is go home. Change into something comfortable, wrap Callum up into a cocoon of blankets on the couch, and not move for at least three days.

“You good to make your way back, or do you need a tow?” Austin asks.

Callum purses his lips, trying and mostly failing to raise his unmarred eyebrow. “I’m fine, Austin.”

“You have a head wound,” Austin says flatly. “You could have a concussion.”

“I have a *scrape*.”

“C’mon,” Austin tells him. “I have a first aid kit in the car.”

Austin lets Callum paddle ahead of him to keep an eye on him, not taking his eyes off Callum until they’re back on solid land. They gather their bags from where they’d laid them out earlier and quietly head back to where they’d parked the car.

Austin stows the boards and throws the bags in the back seat before digging the first aid kit out of the trunk. He’s never actually had to use it, but he’s never been more relieved he has it.

Callum is leaning against the side of the car, arms hanging loosely by his side, and he looks like a fucking disaster. The gash looks like it’s mostly stopped bleeding, but blood is smeared all on the side of his face and down onto his chest. Austin will deal with that later, turning his attention to Callum’s eyebrow first.

“This is probably going to sting,” Austin warns, ripping open an alcohol pad. He steadies Callum’s face with a hand on his chin, wiping as gently as he can around the broken skin and outward. Austin can feel Callum clenching his teeth, but he doesn’t make a sound.

“Am I gonna make it?” Callum asks, eyes dancing like he didn’t just split his face open.

Austin swipes the alcohol pad down Callum’s cheek, cleaning as much of the blood off as he can now that he’s cleared the area directly around the wound. He tucks the pad back in the opened sachet and drops it onto the roof of the car so he can open a pair of butterfly bandages.

“We should put some ointment or something on it when we get home,” Austin says, “but this will do for now.”

He carefully presses the bottom of the bandage under Callum’s

eyebrow then pulls the skin upward to hold the gash closed, repeating it a second time with the other bandage.

“Hold here a sec,” Austin says. He goes and grabs a handful of napkins from his stash in the center console, then pours some water from his water bottle over them.

When he returns, he runs the damp napkins up Callum’s chest and neck, tracing the curve of his jaw and down behind his ear to wipe off the rest of the mess Callum’s made of himself. Callum’s gone quiet, eyes tracking over Austin’s movements without comment. Austin appreciates the silence, doesn’t know what he would say if Callum tried to start bantering. His own skin feels pulled too tight, and he’s twisted up in knots underneath the surface.

“Thanks for patching me up, nurse,” Callum says when Austin finishes, tapping a finger on the tip of Austin’s nose, making his face scrunch up in surprise.

“Did you just boop me?” Austin asks, incredulous.

“No idea what you’re talking about,” Callum says, eyes too round and innocent to be believable. It doesn’t last long in the wake of Austin’s skeptical silence. He ducks his head and smiles wide, self-satisfied and a little crooked, and it makes Austin’s heart skip a beat.

Austin wants to kiss him again so fucking badly.

“You know, there could be people looking at us right now,” he says, so thin of an excuse it’s basically transparent as he takes a step closer, bracketing Callum against the side of the car in a parking lot with no one else around. His bare chest brushes up against Callum’s, the crisp shock of cold water giving way to warm skin.

Callum reaches up to hook a hand around the side of Austin’s neck, thumb swiping underneath his ear before pressing down. “We can’t have that.”

“No,” Austin says, lifting his chin up, lips a breath away from grazing Callum’s mouth. “We wouldn’t want anyone getting the wrong idea.”

Callum is the one who draws Austin in, this time, lips slotting against Austin’s in a fit that feels perfectly made. Austin opens his mouth, wasting no time in chasing the wet heat of Callum’s tongue. Something settles inside him, the frozen spear of fear that sliced straight through him when he saw Callum’s blood-covered face

surface out of the water melting down into a molten core, filling him up until he's nothing but fevered heat.

Austin grips Callum's hips, fingers scratching into his lower back. Callum makes a noise into Austin's mouth that has him surging closer, angling his head to deepen the kiss and do whatever he can to hear that sound again.

Callum abruptly breaks away with a hiss, hand coming up to check his eyebrow.

"Shit, I'm sorry," Austin swears, so caught up in the moment that he'd forgotten entirely.

Callum lets out a breath of a laugh, a small smile lingering on his lips. "Don't—and I cannot stress this enough—worry about it."

Austin frowns, reaching up to trace the skin above Callum's eye. "Someone has to worry about you," he says. "Or else you're gonna need your own bodyguard."

Callum's mouth twitches, eyes softening into something Austin can't quite define. Austin rises up on his toes and presses a gentle kiss next to the twin butterfly bandages, careful not to bother the tender skin. Callum sucks in a breath, and Austin can't help but seal their mouths back together, slower and sweeter than the fervor from before.

"For what it's worth," Callum muses, smile blooming slowly until his mouth is fully stretched with it. "You can guard my body any time."

Austin's mouth slants into a smirk. "C'mon," he says, wrapping a hand around Callum's wrist and squeezing. "Let's go."

They both disappear into their respective showers once they get home, and James' contact lights up Austin's phone with an incoming call when he's slipping into a clean pair of sweatpants.

"Hey," Austin says once the line connects.

"So I heard about the incident at the dog park," James says, getting right to the point. "We're looking into it, but still turning up nothing but loose ends, so no real status updates except to stay the course."

Sometimes Austin wants to ask who exactly James means when he says *we*, but most of the time he thinks he'd rather not know.

"I've also seen some pictures from the dog park," James continues. "And the beach today, and out at lunch two days ago, and—"

"Alright, I get it," Austin interrupts. He doesn't need the full list read back out to him.

"It's nice that you two seem to be... getting along well," James says, amused. Austin doesn't have to guess what kind of pictures James has seen.

You told me to, Austin doesn't say. "Well, it could certainly be worse."

"I'll bet," James replies. "I just wanted to let you know that people are talking, but it seems to be contained to fan spaces and speculation for now," he adds. "No headlines anywhere yet, but I would expect someone to run with it sooner rather than later if you keep going at the rate that you are."

Austin bristles at the comment, not sure if it's meant in judgment or encouragement. He honestly hasn't put any forethought into any of this ever since their first dinner out together, and hearing James talk about it is like a bucket of cold water being dumped directly over Austin's head.

He doesn't think he's been doing any pretending at all, when it comes to Callum.

Austin's just not sure Callum would say the same.

Austin still hasn't figured out how to tell Callum that he bought VIP passes to Coachella just so Callum can see his favorite band in a way that doesn't sound incredibly weird.

He decides to play it off.

They're in the back yard, winding down after dinner. Austin fired up the pizza oven for the first time since Callum started staying with him, and Callum looked at him like he'd solved a quantum physics problem after taking the first bite, like Austin had done something marvelous and complex and not simply put a bunch of toppings on some dough. Callum's in the lounge chair Austin's started thinking of as *his* given how often he finds himself in it, and Austin is splayed out on his

stomach in the grass, mindlessly sketching abstract shapes in his journal.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to tell you,” Austin starts to say, which is true. “I have two passes to Coachella next weekend, but the friend I was going with bailed on me,” he finishes, which is an outright lie. “But since I now find myself with a built in plus-one, want to go?”

“I don’t know,” Callum says slowly. He looks hesitant, bottom lip drawn in between his teeth, and it’s the first time it’s dawned on Austin that going to a music festival with hundreds of thousands of other people might not be the smartest move, given the current situation.

He just wanted to make Callum smile.

“They’re VIP passes with private access,” Austin says, pushing himself up to sit, legs crossing underneath himself. “We can avoid the main crowds, and if you want to leave, we’ll leave. No questions asked.”

Callum chews on the inside of his mouth, hollowing out his cheek. “As soon as I say?” he asks. “No hesitating, no arguing?”

“Swear on my life,” Austin says, laying a hand over his chest.

“Well, you don’t have to go *that* far,” Callum says with a smile.

Austin grins back, pleased that it didn’t take much convincing at all.

When the day comes, Austin gets ready and waits for Callum in the living room, feet kicked up on the coffee table while he scrolls on his phone.

Callum raises both of his eyebrows when he sees Austin. The cut on his face has healed enough that he doesn’t have the bandages on anymore, skin pink and new splitting the tail of his eyebrow in two. Austin’s taken to tracing a finger over it whenever he gets the chance, feeling the shiny skin under his fingertips.

“Are you sure you want to wear that?” Callum asks.

Austin looks down at himself. Jeans, white tank, leather jacket—hardly different than the black t-shirt and jeans Callum himself is sporting. “What?” he asks. “I thought it looked good.”

“Oh, it looks good, that’s not in question,” Callum says, giving Austin

an obvious once over and sending a flush up the back of his neck. "Just think you might get hot is all."

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it," Austin shrugs and stands up, walking over to where Callum's standing near the door. "You ready?"

Callum nods. "All set."

"Let's go, then," Austin says, brushing a quick kiss over Callum's eyebrow before he turns to grab the keys.

The corner of Callum's mouth is curled up in a smile when Austin throws a look over his shoulder to make sure he's coming.

Austin isn't sure when exactly the switch flipped, but after the day at the beach, the casual affection they put on for show outside has bled inside the walls of the house. Callum will snag Austin's hand when they're on the couch and play with his fingers, will run his hands through Austin's hair when Austin sprawls out and rests his head on his thigh. Austin will sling an arm around Callum's waist, will curl into Callum any time he gets the opportunity. Callum will step up behind Austin in the kitchen in the morning, tucking his chin over Austin's shoulder while he makes breakfast, and Austin will tilt his head back to nose at Callum's temple in return.

He doesn't know what to do with it all. When they're outside, Austin knows it's a facade, just the front they're putting on for the rest of the world to detract from the real reason Callum's always around.

But when they're inside, there's no one else to prove anything to.

Austin tries not to dwell on it, tries to treat it the same way he would try to maintain whatever new character he's diving into. Sometimes it's easier than others.

It's a two and a half hour drive to the valley on a good day that creeps to over three with all the added traffic. Austin lets Callum make the playlist even though he knows it means he's going to be subject to car karaoke the entire ride. He leans over to pinch Callum's thigh after a particularly rambunctious performance, and when he doesn't move his hand away, just rests it on top of Callum's knee, Callum puts in no effort to move it for him.

Austin pulls into the line for VIP parking when they approach the festival grounds, car idling as they wait to be directed where to go. They park without problem and follow the signage to the main

grounds, kicking up clouds of dust as they go.

“Where are you going?” Callum asks, tugging on the hem of Austin’s shirt when he starts to walk left where the signs point right.

Austin stops for a beat, throwing a grin over his shoulder. “Trust me?” he asks, looping a hand around Callum’s wrist and pulling him along. “I promise you’re going to like this part.”

“Austin...” Callum trails off, voice full of trepidation, but Austin sees his shoulders relax once they walk up to a barricade blocked off by two security guards.

Austin doesn’t like to throw the weight of his name around, but every now and then there are perks to, well, being him. He doesn’t like to do it because he doesn’t like the extra attention that it brings him, but there are certain times when it’s worth the hassle.

Like now.

He’d reached out to James who’d reached out to who knows who—the only part that matters is Austin swung getting Callum into The Prodigy’s green room before their set later. He has to bite his lip to keep his smile from giving too much away, walking a half-step in front of Callum as one of the security guards leads them to where they need to go.

After winding through a long maze of trailers and tour buses and beat-up vans, Callum stops short right before they get to the door. “Austin,” he says, eyes wide and full of suspicion, like where they are has finally dawned on him. “You can’t let me go in there unprepared if what I think is about to happen is about to happen.”

“So I knew a guy who knew a guy,” Austin offers. “Consider yourself warned.”

Austin knocks, and the band greets them before welcoming them inside. Austin falls back, standing on the outskirts as Callum gushes, hands waving around as he talks about one of their records.

It’s unbearably charming, seeing Callum’s cheeks flush the faintest hint of pink and seeing him go a little shy and tongue-tied. It’s so different from the Callum that Austin is used to, and he can’t help but wonder which one is more real.

He hopes the answer is both.

They shoot the shit with the band for maybe half an hour before they have to make their exit, but not before telling Callum and Austin that they can hang around for as long as they like.

“Oh my god,” Callum squeaks as soon as the door closes, bouncing on his toes as he tackles Austin in a hug. “*Austin*,” he says, squeezing around Austin’s waist and lifting him into the air with the force of his enthusiasm.

Austin laughs, hands bracing on Callum’s shoulders. “I told you to trust me.”

Callum puts him down, lifting his arms to cup both of Austin’s cheeks in his palms. He plants a wet smacking kiss on Austin’s mouth before drawing him back into another tight hug. “That was fucking amazing,” he gushes. “You’re a legend. I’m never going to forget this.”

“I’m glad,” Austin says, sliding his hands down to tuck in the back pockets of Callum’s jeans. There’s a burst of warmth deep inside his chest, glowing twice as bright as Callum’s elated smile.

“Thank you,” Callum says, voice pitching lower in honest appreciation. “You really didn’t have to do this for me—and don’t try to pretend it wasn’t only for me, either.”

“I know I didn’t have to,” Austin tells him. “I wanted to.”

Callum opens his mouth like he wants to say something else but then stops, pressing his lips together and letting out a heavy sigh. Austin moves his hands to settle on his hips, thumbs brushing over the waistline of his jeans.

“You’re something else, you know that?” Callum finally says, arms winding their way around Austin’s neck, shaking him gently. He’s looking at Austin with eyes full of wonder, like he can’t quite believe any of this is real. It’s a feeling that Austin’s become intimately familiar with the past few weeks.

Callum feels a whole lot like something that’s too good to be true, and Austin is trying to not cling too hard to something he knows he’s going to have to let go of sooner rather than later.

“We should go,” Austin says, reaching up to wrap his fingers around Callum’s wrists and untangling his arms from around his neck. “Can’t have you missing the set after all that.”

Callum smiles, close-mouthed and a little wistful, but if there's something else he wants to say he decides against it, following Austin out of the dressing room and outside to watch from the side of the stage. It's a killer view, like they're a part of the production rather than just observing it.

The rumble of the speakers shakes him down to his bones, earplugs not doing much to muffle the onslaught of sound that roars out around him. Austin doesn't really know any of the songs, but he has as much fun watching Callum jump around and shout along to the words as he does watching the band on stage, if not more. He bobs his head in time with the music, heel tapping to the beat.

Callum throws an arm over Austin's shoulder and pulls him in close. "Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to *dance*?" he yells in Austin's ear.

"How do you even dance to this?" Austin argues, waving an arm in a way he hopes encompasses all the heavy guitars and kick drums. It's the kind of music that makes Austin's fingers itch for his guitar, not the kind that compels him to dance.

"Pft, it's easy," Callum says. He takes hold of Austin's arms, one in each hand, and dances along behind him like an overexcited puppeteer.

Austin lets himself be led, giggling when Callum throws their arms out a little too wide, too fast, knocking them off balance. Austin catches him before they both fall to the ground in a tangle of limbs, yanking Callum in close and laughing into his neck when they collide.

Callum slings his arms loosely around Austin's waist, hips aligning as they swing side to side in time with the music. "See?" Callum says, hands gently guiding Austin's body. "Easy."

And it is. Everything with Callum is easy, and Austin hasn't stopped being surprised by it. From long stretches of comfortable silences at home to making a spectacle of himself in public, Austin hasn't once felt stilted with Callum by his side. Nothing feels forced or artificial, and Austin doesn't feel exhausted at the end of the day even when they spend every waking second together, never getting close to the way he feels drained and spent after a day full of engagements where he has to put in the effort to be *Austin Butler*.

With Callum he can just be, no expectations, no standard to live up to.

A new song starts, and Callum lets go of Austin to yell along, arm held up high overhead, hand punching the air emphasizing each and every word. Austin can't help but to watch him, the muscles in his throat working as he swallows, wetting his throat so he can keep screaming along.

The set is over before he knows it, and they mosey around various tents, sticking around if something sounds interesting and moving on when it doesn't. Austin has never been the biggest fan of crowds even before he had a real reason to have an aversion, and when his stomach starts rumbling for food he takes the first chance he can to take them to somewhere a little less congested.

The Rose Garden is off on the edge of the festival grounds, as far removed from the main stage as they can get. There are smaller tents nearby, but it's as quiet as anything has been all day.

"Austin," Callum says, voice so dangerously serious that it stops Austin dead from where he was making a beeline straight to the food trucks.

"Yeah?"

Callum widens his eyes until they're almost perfectly round. "Can we get *cheese fries*?" he asks, overaggrating the enunciation with a put-upon American accent as he gestures towards a particular truck

Austin snorts. "You can get whatever you want," he says. "My treat."

"So anyone here you're dying to see?" Callum asks once they've parked up at a small table that's shaded from the low-angled afternoon sun. He shovels an ill-advised amount of loaded fries into his mouth, cheeks going chipmunk full as he chews.

"Lady Gaga is later tonight, and I definitely want to stick around for her set," Austin says. "Other than that I'm up for whatever."

"Of course you do," Callum teases, "but if there's no one else, want to just hang here for a bit?"

Austin has no qualms with that idea.

They make their way to the VIP area off to the side of the main stage once the shadows start to stretch out long, setting sun casting a golden glow on everything around them. Austin lets himself breathe a little easier with the extra space they carve out for themselves, sinking into

the pull of Callum's gravity as the fading light of the sun finally settles below the horizon and only the glare of the stage lights illuminate their surroundings, the first notes of music reverberating out into the field.

He doesn't have the surging crush of bodies in the crowd as an excuse to lean on Callum, but Callum doesn't seem to mind. If anything Callum drags Austin closer, but his high-energy enthusiasm from earlier has mellowed into an pulsating sway.

"Do you need me to remind you how to dance?" Callum asks after the first few songs, knocking his shoulders into Austin's in a lazy shimmy.

Austin laughs, exasperated, but he starts to shift his weight between his feet with a little more panache, trying to find the rhythm. He lets the bass wash over him, vibrating through the grass and into his bones, reaching his arms up high and looking to the night sky. Something about being in the dark makes it easier to let go, even with the bright strobe lights flaring in and out in time with the music around them, a rainbow of colors tinting everything and dulling out the details.

He turns to face Callum, closing what little distance remains between them while he attempts to mirror the undulating waves rolling through Callum's body. Austin feels ridiculous, knows he probably looks it, but the joyful laugh that tumbles out of Callum's mouth when he tries makes it all worthwhile. They scream-sing in each other's faces, noses bumping into one another with every *ra ra ooh la la*, until they're both covered in a sheen sweat from the exertion.

Callum's dark curls stick to his temples, and Austin reaches up to run a hand through them, pushing his hair off of his forehead. He lets his hand linger on Callum's neck when he's done, thumbing at the notch of Callum's jaw and swiping over his stubble-roughened skin. Austin pulls him down just because he *can*, and their lips crash in an opened mouth kiss, sloppy and clumsy and still so fucking perfect.

Austin licks into Callum's mouth, their tongues tangling together in a wet slide. A shock of electricity shoots through Austin's entire body, from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, sparking hot and crackling underneath his skin. Callum slides a broad hand up underneath Austin's tank top, fingers grasping and slipping on the sweat-damp curve of his lower back. The splay of his hand takes up almost all of the breadth of where Austin's waistline narrows, and it makes Austin dizzy, makes him wonder what Callum's hands would

feel like everywhere else.

He wants Callum's hands all over him, touching and squeezing and taking up space, filling him up and stroking over every expanse of skin until there isn't a single part of Austin's body that Callum hasn't laid claim to. He wants to feel Callum even after he's done, the ghost of his touch still imprinted on Austin long after he's gone.

Callum's hand glides up Austin's spine until it's firmly pressed between his shoulder blades, flattening their chests together. Austin grinds against him, biting at his lips and sucking at his tongue until he's breathless, all the air in Austin's lungs stolen directly from his mouth, his entire body burning in a conflicting battle of need and desire.

The song fades out, and when the next one starts, Callum pulls away with a gasp. "Oh, I fuckin' love this one," he shouts, his wide dazzling smile brightening up his darkened eyes as he bounces on his heels.

Austin strips off his jacket, overheated and overstimulated. The nighttime desert breeze blows over the sweat-sticky skin of his exposed arms, sending a cool relieving shiver down his spine.

"Here, let me," Callum says, taking Austin's jacket and folding it over his forearm to hold. He pulls Austin into him and presses his chest flush against Austin's back, his hands reaching to clasp together around Austin's front. "Are you having fun?" he asks, lips brushing Austin's ear and sending another kind of shiver through him.

Austin leans back, head resting in the curve of Callum's shoulder. He presses a kiss to the underside of Callum's chin. "I am," he says. "Are you?"

Callum's hand slides up to wrap around the front of Austin's throat, fingers open wide and loose. "Yeah," Callum confirms, voice rough from a whole day of singing at the top of his lungs. "Couldn't be better."

He leaves a trail of kisses along Austin's jaw and down his neck, messily mouthing at every inch of skin he can reach. He licks a long stripe underneath Austin's ear, following it with a scrape of teeth that forces Austin to spin around and kiss him properly. Callum's arms tighten around him, his jacket roughly rubbing the soaked-through fabric of his tank top into his lower back. Austin threads both his hands through Callum's hair, tugging at the curls when Callum nips at his bottom lip.

Austin wants to mark him up. He wants to suck dark bruises into Callum's neck and leave long fingernail scratches down the plane of his back. He wants to dig his fingertips into Callum's hips until he's branded with it, until he's marked forever with Austin's touch, too. He wants Callum to have physical reminders of where Austin's been, even when Austin isn't around, and he wants everyone else to see it. To *know*.

He wedges a thigh between Callum's legs and rolls their hips together with targeted pressure, and they both let out a gasp in tandem, mouths falling open. Austin leans back just enough to see Callum's face, illuminated in flashes of pink-purple-white. His lips are shiny with Austin's spit, eyes blown wide, and Austin really thinks they should get the fuck out of here and go to the hotel he'd booked for the night.

Austin's mouth feels puffy and kiss-bruised, raw from the scrape of Callum's stubble. He looks up at Callum through half-lidded eyes. "Cal," he says, but nothing else comes out. Austin has no idea how to encapsulate everything he's feeling, everything he *wants*, with just words.

He smiles lazily at Callum instead, feeling dazed, hoping his face can say enough for him to not need to say anything at all.

"Fuck," Callum swears. He closes his eyes Austin feels him take a deep, steadying breath in. When he lets it out, he leans forward, pressing their foreheads together.

They stay like that for a drawn-out moment, swaying in half-time to the thumping music around them, Austin's fingers fisting tightly on the back of Callum's shirt. Everything else around them falls away, the shout of thousands of voices muffling into static, fading into the background until all Austin can hear is the pounding of his own heartbeat and the blood rushing in his ears.

Austin tilts his head up, brushing their lips back together in a phantom of a kiss. Mouths parted open, they trade breaths, inhaling and exhaling in perfect cadence until all of the air around them is shared, is *theirs*.

Callum reaches up and cups the side of Austin's face, thumb skimming underneath his cheekbone. Callum kisses him, hard and fast, taking a step away before Austin can push back into it. "I'm going to grab some water, okay?" he says, eyes locked on to Austin's, heavy with

something Austin doesn't know how to name. "I'll be right back, stay right here for me."

Austin can only nod, words still caught in his throat, sealed behind a wall he didn't even know was there, let alone begin to know how to start tearing down. His feet anchor down into the grass, weighing him down so much he's not sure if he could move even if he wanted to, but Callum doesn't want him to, so he won't.

He zones out, mind wandering, racing with all the possibilities of what's going to happen next. Austin knows what he wants, knows it now more than ever, and while it feels like Callum might want the same thing it's still hard to convince himself it's true. All of this, from tonight and everything before it, feels above and beyond the need to fake something, to convince other people that there's something real.

No one else could see Callum's fingertips underneath Austin's shirt, or the reverent way that they stroked over Austin's ribs. No one else could feel Callum's tongue in his mouth, the teasing flicks and tantalizing licks. No one else could see the look in his eyes when they were that close to Austin's in the dark, the molten heat and the overwhelmingly warm *fondness*.

It doesn't feel like any of that was for show. It doesn't feel anything other than completely and terrifyingly genuine.

A jagged, spiked ball of fear grows ragged in Austin's chest, stinging over his heart and tearing up his throat. He wasn't prepared for any of this, not the shadowy threats that threw him into the situation, not Callum being around all of the time, not pretending to feel something that he doesn't, but above all else—Austin wasn't prepared for it to be real.

If it's real, it's something he can lose, and that's not something he's prepared for either.

It's not long before he feels a body pressing against his, and Austin turns his head with a grin, shaking off all of his thoughts to deal with another time.

He freezes, body going stiff and rigid, when he realizes whoever is crowding into him isn't Callum at all.

"You sure know how to put on a show," a voice slurs into his ear, breath wet on Austin's neck in a way that grinds his teeth together, jaw tensing.

Austin throws an elbow back and moves away, but a hand grabbing onto his arm stops him from getting too far.

“Hey now, I’m only trying to give you a compliment, you don’t have to be like that,” the guy says.

Austin refuses to turn and face him, shutting down his face and ignoring him as soon as he yanks his arm free. He’s not going to give him the satisfaction.

“Where’d your boyfriend go, huh? If I was him I wouldn’t leave you alone for even a second.”

Austin clenches his jaw, biting back all the responses he wants to give because he doesn’t want this to escalate, to become a real problem. He just wants this guy to take a fucking hint.

“Hey, I’m trying to talk to you, don’t you want to talk to me?” the guy taunts, reaching out and putting a hand on Austin’s shoulder, trying to force him to turn around.

“Do we have a fucking problem here?” Callum’s voice rings out. He moves faster than Austin can process, bodying his way in between Austin and the drunk guy before Austin even realized he’d returned.

Austin can only make out his profile, but even still, he sees Callum’s face harden. He feels the hard line of Callum’s spine even through the gap that separates them, unyielding and as strong as steel. He’s holding himself in a way that Austin’s never seen before; there’d been competence and calculation in the way he’d cleared Austin’s house, in the way he’d scan their surroundings and file away entrances and exits when they’d go out, but Austin has never witnessed him radiate *intimidation* like this, shoulders broadening unfathomably wider, chest puffed out like he’s fucking daring this guy to try him. More than ever before, Austin doesn’t doubt that Callum would have this guy on the ground before he could even twitch with the wrong intention.

“Jesus, sorry,” Austin hears, and the guy throws his hand up in surrender. “No problem at all,” he says before slinking away into whatever dark corner he’d crawled out of.

Austin sighs in relief, the wound taut line of his shoulders releasing down out of his ears as Callum turns back toward him.

“Are you okay?” Callum asks, voice and posture immediately softening once his focus is back on Austin, melting back into

something more familiar.

“I’m fine,” Austin assures him. “It was nothing, really,” he says, it doesn’t even sound convincing to himself. There have been too many close calls, lately, and it’s doing his head in. He can’t separate what’s a coincidence, what’s an accident or a regular misunderstanding, with what could be the start of something more ominous, and it digs a well of paranoia deep in his gut.

“We’re leaving,” Callum says, a finality in his voice that brokers no argument. Austin has never been more in agreement.

It’s a long walk back to the car, but Callum’s hand doesn’t leave Austin’s the entire way, their fingers woven together in an unbreakable grip.

Chapter 2

WATCH NOW: Austin Butler and Friend Dance the Night Away at Coachella

Temperatures are rising in the desert! An Instagram story has gone viral overnight, in a brief clip that appears to show Oscar-nominated actor Austin Butler letting loose during Lady Gaga's performance at the Coachella Valley Music Festival. The video, posted to a fan's personal account, quickly gained traction online as users shared their reactions to the *Dune* star dancing without any inhibitions with an unnamed friend. We certainly hope Austin and his pal had as much fun as it looks like they were having! Watch the video below and see for yourself.

[VIDEO DESCRIPTION: A smiling man in a white tank top and black leather jacket dances together with a man in a black t-shirt until he stops to remove his jacket. The second man, standing behind him, takes the jacket from him and then wraps his arms around the man in front. They sway in time to upbeat pop music. The video cuts off abruptly as the man in front tilts his head back and leans in towards the man behind.]

Comments (192)

feydRAWme Bruh who IS that??? Does he have a brother. Do they need a third ••

zippybrews I too love necking and grinding with my ~friends ~

hunkahunkaburninglove how is it possible for someone to make austin butler look so babygirl wtf wtf wtf

aspiringausbutexwife HELLO????????????? WHAT is THIS

austinbutlersbiggestfan Just because they're hanging out a lot recently doesn't mean there's anything going on, this stuff is why he's so private. A guy can't even have friends without you all making it freaking weird!

aspiringausbutexwife @austinbutlersbiggestfan dude i think it's less that they're hanging out a lot and more that they look at each other like that and touch each other as much as they do lmao. did you even WATCH the video? like please open your eyes.

austinbutlersbiggestfan @aspiringausbutexwife OK I just watched it and while I have to admit they are clearly very close... I'm still not going to believe anything until we hear it from Austin himself and everyone else should consider doing the same.

majorgaylecleven @austinbutlersbiggestfan there are literally pictures of them kissing on the beach be so for real right now

austinbutlersbiggestfan @majorgaylecleven Those are so blurry they could be anyone. Also I think your username is so disrespectful you should honestly delete your account.

Austin is pulled out of sleep by the rapid buzz of his phone, vibrating at such a steady frequency that he thinks he's getting an incoming call. He slaps out a hand, unplugging it from where it's charging on his bedside table, and his eyes widen when the screen comes to life. His notifications are blown up into the triple digits, with a slew of new messages continuing to come through as he stares dumbly at the lock screen.

For a brief moment, he considers turning it off and rolling over to burrow back under the covers. He doesn't have message preview enabled, so he has no idea what's happening, and there's a part of him that wants to keep living in ignorance. If it were an emergency, or something genuinely important and time-sensitive, James would have called. Opening the messages feels like opening Pandora's Box, because once he reads them, Austin is inevitably going to have to *do* something about them. Whatever is causing this much furor probably isn't something that can be left alone.

He wants to pretend a little while longer, but he doesn't even have the excuse of the hour to keep ignoring everyone; it's mid-morning, warm rays of sun filtering in through his bedroom window, beams of bright light flooding the room. He'd stayed up too late again last night, and nothing on his calendar for today meant not bothering to set any real alarms.

Austin twists the blankets between his legs, curling onto his side as he unlocks his phone and thumbs open his texts. His thread with Ashley is pinned to the top, lit up with unread messages, and he figures that's probably one of the safest places to start.

AUSTIN ROBERT BUTLER!!!!

If I'm right, which I'm sure I'm right, your phone is probably blowing up in a way that has you equal parts annoyed and horrified right now. I will save you the trouble of having to find out why on your own for the small price of TEXTING ME BACK AS SOON AS YOU SEE THIS

Following the text is a link to an article with an embedded video, and Austin's stomach drops. He scans over the article, mindless drivel that doesn't do much besides describe the content of the video. He steadfastly avoids the comments before pressing play, toggling his volume down as the video goes full screen. He would rather not watch it at all, honestly, but figures it's better to brace himself for what's to come instead of continuing to stumble blindly into the dark.

It's a short clip, camera unsteady and wavering with stage lights intermittently flaring and overexposing the lens. On screen, Austin sees himself wipe sweat off of his forehead as Callum jumps and sings along, arms thrown up in the air. Austin takes off his jacket, and Callum takes it from him. The camera slips, dropping down to film the grass, but it aims back up right as Callum pulls Austin into his chest, arms tightening low around his waist. They move together, rocking side to side, and the video ends when Austin starts to lean further back into him.

Austin closes his eyes and lets out a long sigh. He vividly remembers what happened after the video cuts off, so all things considered his morning could have been significantly fucking worse, but he's still not looking forward to any of this.

Might as well go ahead and rip the band-aid off.

Good morning to you too

He lives!

Yeah, yeah, you're very funny

So are you going to make me beg or are you going to SPILL to your nearest and dearest friend??

I will admit that I've seen some of the recent pictures, but I didn't want to pry

However that will no longer stand and I demand to know several things

WHAT IS THIS? WHO IS THIS??? TELL ME EVERYTHING

Looks like a video to me

Austin

His name is Callum

Keep going

He's my bodyguard

Yeah, he sure looks like he's doing a fantastic job at guarding your body

Austin sighs again, pushing himself up to sit against the headboard. He drags a hand down over his face, rubbing his fingers into the corners of his eyes. There's a dull throbbing pressure building up at his temples, and he should probably get up and drink some water before he gives himself a headache, but he doesn't want to keep doing this over text—there doesn't need to be a written record of the things he's going to have to say.

Can you call?

The shrill tones of *Fabulous* ring out from Austin's phone before he can even put it down. Austin had missed an important call from Ashley one whole time and she'd gone in and changed the ringtone for herself in his contacts—to make sure he'd always know when it was her calling, Austin, obviously—and over the years he's well past given up on trying to change it to anything else, because somehow whenever he does Ashley *knows* and changes it back when Austin isn't paying attention.

"What's going on, Austin?" Ashley asks as soon as he picks up the call.

Austin lets out a loud groan, flopping down onto his back on the bed. "I'm a caricature, Ash."

"Well, that's not news," Ashley says, nonplussed by his dramatics, "but do go on."

"So, don't freak out," Austin prefaces.

"I will freak out if it's worth freaking out over, thank you."

Austin takes a deep breath, not even entirely sure where he should start. "A few weeks ago, James called me into his office," he begins,

figuring he should just take it from the top. “Apparently there were some threats with enough behind them that it was agreed it would be worthwhile to saddle me with extra security.”

“Yes, *saddled*, that’s the word I would use for this,” Ashley says, dry as the desert. “There’s been more proof of life from you in the past week than I’ve ever seen when you’ve been on a break before. Tell me, are his arms around you part of an upgraded protection plan?”

“It’s a cover,” Austin explains. “It’s the most straightforward reason for why I’d have the same guy hanging around me all the time. James said so.”

Ashley’s answering silence stretches out so long Austin pulls his phone away from his ear to make sure the call didn’t disconnect. “To be incredibly clear,” Ashley finally says. “James told you to pretend to be dating your bodyguard? Instead of just saying he’s your friend.”

“Well,” Austin hedges. “When I asked what I should say if anyone questions anything, he said something like, *I don’t know, say he’s your boyfriend.*”

Ashley makes a considering noise, but doesn’t say anything else right away.

Austin waits her out.

“You said you were a caricature,” she finally prompts. “What did you mean?”

Austin swallows around a lump in his throat. “It’s stupid,” he says “*I* would be unimpressed with me, if I weren’t me.”

“Austin,” Ashley admonishes.

“I like him, okay?” Austin says, unable to push down the frustrated huff that comes with the confession. “I like him a lot,” he repeats, but this time it’s quiet, understated in the way he only gets when he’s being honest.

“Oh, Austin,” Ashley sighs.

“And I thought that I—the whole reason that I told—” Austin cuts himself off, jaw tensing as he clenches his teeth. “I feel like a hypocrite,” he finishes.

"That was over a year ago," Ashley says, knowing what Austin's trying to get at without him having to actually say it all, like she always does. "You're allowed to change your mind."

"Anyway," Austin deflects, thinking that chewing glass might have been a better way to spend his morning than explaining all of this. "Enough about me. How have you been?"

Ashley lets him get away with the deflection and starts to ramble on, and it's settling, familiar and comfortable in a way that he hasn't felt too much of recently. He's surprisingly at ease around Callum, but there's always something underlying in their time together, something that makes Austin feel just to the left of centered. Unbalanced and off-kilter.

He glances at the time, eyebrows rising when he sees that it's been over an hour and a half since Ashley had called. "I should go make breakfast," he announces. He does feel a little better after getting everything off of his chest, but his battery is starting to run low. It's hardly even an excuse, given how he really should go eat something by now or his trainer will have his head.

Ashley snorts. "For your super hot, super fake boyfriend, who is super living with you right now."

"Fuck you," Austin says with a smile. "Thanks for checking in."

"You know I always got you, babe," Ashley says. "But hey, Austin?" she continues after a pause.

"What?"

"Don't think too much about all of it, okay?" Ashley tells him. "You like him, and there's nothing wrong with that. He certainly looks like he likes you too—I mean, you clearly enjoy each other's company, if nothing else. Try not to stress out about the rest of it right now."

Austin thinks that's a lot easier said than done, but he tells her he'll try his best before hanging up the phone.

Austin Butler was spotted out and about today running errands with a friend near his LA home, and we only wish we looked this good weighing the pros and cons of which vegetables we ought to be eating for dinner tonight (jury is still out on if we're eating enough of those to begin with, but who are you, our mother?).

[IMAGE DESCRIPTION: A man dressed casually with messy dark brown hair stands behind a shopping cart, leaning forward with his forearms resting on the handle as he watches a second man with light brown hair compare produce.]

Comments (58)

ausbutt this is some groundbreaking journalism right here

controlthespice @ausbutt bold statement from user ausbutt

ausbutt @controlthespice excuse me but his ass in fact breaks several grounds and i will not be entertaining any implications otherwise

bennyandthebikes i've never wanted to be asparagus so bad

allshookup okay but his "friend" needs to shave, that mustache is HORRENDOUS

austinsboyfriendsmustache @allshookup i will not tolerate this slander that's the sexiest caterpillar i've ever seen in my life
#KEEPTHEMUSTACHE

mrpbb @austinsboyfriendsmustache it really says something that he's still one of the hottest motherfuckers i've ever seen even with that thing on his face, but i gotta agree he looks better without it. think of austin's poor delicate skin.

austinsboyfriendsmustache @mrpbb oh believe you me i am thinking about it, but i don't think austin getting a little scratched up would be a bad thing.....

wormstache @austinsboyfriendsmustache you're right and you should say it

austinsboyfriendsmustache @wormstache @mrpbb with how scruffy and sleepy they both look here you'd think they were up all night the night before. one has to wonder what they got up to!

wormstache @austinsboyfriendsmustache it really does Make You Think...! ☐

allshookup @austinsboyfriendsmustache @mrpb

@wormstache look i'm really happy for all of you but can you please get out of my notifications and talk about this somewhere else

There's an itch inside Austin that he can't shake loose.

He's been restless all day, even after running himself ragged after his morning workout. Cardio wasn't on the training plan for today, but he still felt like his bones were going to vibrate their way out of his skin after lifting, so he'd thrown on his running shoes without thinking twice about it.

Callum had watched him lace up, hands on his hips and bottom lip pulled between his teeth, before he sighed and came back a minute later in shorts riding high enough that Austin nearly swallowed his tongue.

"You don't have to—" Austin had started to say, jaw clicking when he snapped it shut when he realized that Callum did, in fact, have to. Wherever Austin went, Callum had to follow.

Because being Austin's babysitter was his job.

Austin grit his teeth, biting down anything else he wanted to say as they left the house. For a glorious hour, his mind went blank, static fuzzing out and filling in the fissures in his head as his feet mechanically pounded the pavement.

And then they circled back home, and Austin was left with nothing but Callum, red-faced and puffing out labored breaths. His shirt sheered out, soaked with sweat and clinging to his heaving chest, and Austin realized he'd probably gone and fucked this up, too.

And now he can't stop thinking about it.

"Do you need me to sit on you? Fuck," Callum says once they're both showered and slumped on the couch. He drops a hand on Austin's

bouncing leg, palm spreading the breadth of Austin's thigh and fingers wrapping around to hook underneath his knee. Callum squeezes gently and doesn't let go, and Austin isn't sure this is the best plan of action if Callum wants him to relax.

His body is heavy, strung out and gooey-muscle, but his mind won't stop spinning in circles. Austin knows what he usually does when he gets like this, but he hasn't ever since Callum came crashing into his life. He slides his eyes over to Callum and considers what he knows about him, if he'd be into the idea, and decides he doesn't care.

Austin needs to get fucking high.

"I'll be right back," Austin tells him, moving Callum's hand off his knee and heading down the hallway to his bedroom. He keeps his shit in a box on his dresser; it's small, geometric lines carved into stained wood, decorative and unassuming.

Austin takes the whole thing into the living room, sinking back down onto the couch next to Callum. He leans forward and undoes the latch, flipping the lid open and fishing out the goods.

He holds up a small bag of weed between two fingers and looks up at Callum, who's unabashedly staring back, eyebrows lifted high in surprise.

"You want?" Austin asks. "I can go outside, or something, if it bothers you."

Callum chuckles, his smile going crooked at the corner of his mouth. His eyes fall heavy-lidded as he looks Austin up and down. "Would take a lot more than that to bother me," he says, lifting his chin toward the baggy Austin is still holding aloft.

"Good to know," Austin says, filing that away for future reference. He opens the bag and takes out his grinder, shaking out just enough for one roll before closing the bag and tucking it back in the box. He rotates the grinder and lets himself get lost in the ritual of it, laying out the paper and lining everything up before rolling, careful hands going through practiced motions.

Austin likes the process, likes doing it himself. There's a reason he doesn't just buy pre-rolls even though it's faster and more convenient that way. It helps him, gives him something to focus on, starts quieting his mind before he even lights up and takes his first hit.

He brings the joint up to his mouth, licking over the edge of the paper and then pressing down to seal it all together.

“You never answered me,” Austin says. He slots the joint between his lips and pulls out his lighter, flicking it open and holding the flame to the end, watching the paper catch and glow orange as he inhales deep. He holds it between his thumb and his forefinger and sinks back into the cushions, head falling against the top edge of the couch as he blows out a controlled puff of smoke. Callum’s eyes are dark when Austin turns to him, arm extending out in offer. “You want?”

Conflict colors Callum’s face, clear as a cloudless day. He flattens his mouth, lips pressing into a thin line. “I shouldn’t,” he says, hesitant, like he doesn’t believe it. It’s not a *no*, not an *I don’t want to*, but I *shouldn’t*.

Austin is tired of worrying about what he should and shouldn’t do instead of letting himself have what he *wants*. He’s been tying himself in knots over it, holding back when he wants to reach out and then beating himself up over it after giving in. He takes another hit, eyes sliding closed as he breathes the smoke into his lungs. He holds it there until it burns.

“What if we don’t leave the house for like, three days?” Austin muses. He looks back at Callum, head lolling to the side. “Would you want to then?”

Callum’s tongue darts out of his mouth, licking over his lips. Austin traces the movement with his eyes. If Callum were closer, Austin would melt all the way into him. He’d tip his chin up and press their mouths together, follow the path of Callum’s tongue with his teeth.

“You don’t have anywhere else you need to be today?” Callum asks, looking for confirmation that he already has. Their calendars are synced, now. Anywhere Austin has to be, Callum knows.

Austin grins, wide with winning. The question itself is an acquiesce, and Austin passes the joint over to Callum in answer, scooting closer as he does.

Callum takes a long drag, lips pursing around the paper, and Austin’s skin starts buzzing with something new. It’s not the restless itch that had been plaguing him all day; it crackles, white-hot and jagged underneath the surface. Austin tamps down on the part of himself that says he should look away, should pretend he’s doing anything other than staring, and he watches Callum’s mouth soften as he exhales,

smoke billowing out in weightless curling tendrils.

Callum smiles, satisfied, and he passes back to Austin. "Not bad."

Austin's chest goes tight, and it's not from the smoke. His fingers brush against Callum's as he takes the joint, clumsy and uncoordinated, and Austin swallows hard. The high is starting to hit, blurring out the edges of his periphery and cloaking his body in a deep haze. His mouth is dry and his eyes are getting heavy, but there's one persistent feeling that drowns out everything else.

He's so fucking hungry.

Austin moves before he can second guess himself, swinging a leg over Callum's lap and straddling the wide spread of his thighs. They're sturdy, strong lines of lean muscle padded out with a soft layer of fat, and every time Austin sees them he's struck with the thought that they were made for sitting on.

He's glad to find out that he was right.

"Hi," Callum says, hands quickly coming up to brace on Austin's hips. He closes his knees slightly to give Austin a more solid lap to perch on, thumbs dipping under the hem of Austin's shirt and pressing into bare skin. There's amusement etched into the half-smile still lingering on Callum's mouth, but there's something else underneath it, too. It's a puzzle that Austin wants to solve. He wants to crack the code and find the key to unlock every feeling that Callum's been holding close, because Austin knows he hasn't been telling Callum everything he's been thinking and he can't help but wonder if Callum's been keeping things to himself too.

He can't help but wonder if Callum feels even half out of his mind as Austin does.

"Hi," Austin returns. He takes a pull off the joint and dips down until his mouth is hovering a breath away from Callum's. When Callum gets the memo, Austin blows smoke into Callum's open, waiting mouth. Their lips graze, barely touching, an insufficient facsimile of what Austin really wants.

Callum's hands grip tighter, dragging Austin in closer. Austin shifts his weight, breath hitching when the front of his pelvis meets the crease of Callum's hip, warm and solid underneath him. Callum bites his bottom lip as he blows smoke out through his nose, teeth indenting into pillow-soft pink flesh.

Austin feels more winded now than he did after his run, chest constricting, slow rolling heaves racking his body as it begs for more air. Callum's face starts to color, a burning flush on his skin that paints his cheekbones as red as his mouth. It's irresistible, a siren call roaring out loud inside Austin's head, asking to be touched.

He reaches out with his free hand to grab Callum's chin, thumb tracing over the curve of his lower lip. It glides easily, lip still wet with Callum's spit, and Austin pulls it down, peeling it away from Callum's teeth to slide inside. Callum lets his jaw fall open as Austin presses deeper, mapping out the inside of Callum's cheek. His mouth is so fucking big. Austin wonders how much of his hand could fit inside it if he tried.

Austin pulls back and places the joint in between Callum's parted lips instead, fingertips dipping back inside Callum's mouth before he closes it and sucks hard, ember flaring bright as his eyes go molten. His heat-filled gaze stays locked on Austin's, all the blue around his pupils swallowed up by black. It ignites something deep in Austin, a scorching flame that licks through his veins and leaves his blood boiling.

The hand Austin has braced on Callum's shoulder flexes, digging into the well of Callum's collar bone. Austin twists, reaching behind himself to put the joint out on the tray on the coffee table before diving back in to take his turn.

He doesn't leave any space, this time. Austin grabs Callum's face with both hands, folding over him and firmly sealing their mouths together. He inhales sharply, eyes fluttering closed when the smoke fills his mouth, and he swallows it all down until he can't breathe at all anymore.

Callum draws uneven circles on Austin's hips with his thumbs, a mindless motion, pressure feather-light. Austin rocks into him, chasing his touch as the last remaining smoke streams out between them. Callum closes his mouth but Austin doesn't pull away, arranging their lips together in a real kiss as he threads his fingers through Callum's hair, clutching at his curls.

Austin feels like he's on the precipice of something, standing at the edge of a cliff and looking down at a perilous drop-off. He knows he doesn't want to turn back, but he doesn't know if he's supposed to jump; he doesn't know if he has a parachute, or if he's harnessed into an anchored-down rope. He doesn't know if he'll survive the jump at

all, but there's one thing he does know.

Falling is accidental—jumping is a choice.

Callum opens his mouth and Austin dives into him, a running leap off of the edge that sends him soaring into the unknown. They've kissed before, but never *here*, never at home on his couch with no one else around as a witness. Never when it wasn't for show.

Austin's floating, weightless and suspended, waiting for the drop to come. His shoulders tense in anticipation for the nosedive, the moment where everything crashes down, but Callum's tongue teases along his own, drawing him in. He holds Austin up, fighting the pull of gravity, and the sinking plunge that Austin keeps waiting for never comes.

Time bends, seconds stretching out and folding over until minutes feel like hours. Austin explores the inside of Callum's mouth, and he thinks he could spend days here. He could dedicate a whole week of his life to running his tongue over Callum's teeth, learning every nook and cranny, committing all the pointed edges and smooth surfaces to memory.

Callum wraps a hand around the back of his knee and squeezes, manhandling Austin until he's straddling just one of Callum's thighs. He pushes it up between Austin's legs, a hot drag of friction that causes a choked-off whine to fall out of Austin's mouth. He's half-hard, body heated in a languid kind of way, desire running through him like low-humming background noise. Present, but not pressing.

"Fuck," Callum gasps when Austin lazily grinds against him, his own hips bucking up to meet the movement. "*Baby.*"

A strangled moan escapes Austin's chest, and one of Callum's hands slides up to fist in his hair, fingers tightening at the roots to reel him back into a kiss. Austin goes willingly, pliant under Callum's touch. He feels malleable, like Callum's attention could turn him into something brand new, transform him into a version of himself that he's never seen before.

It's like having a full tank of gas and a long stretch of open road laid in front of him, ready to take him wherever his heart desires. The possibilities are endless, a thousand potential outcomes branching off of one another, and all Austin has to do is decide which path he wants to go down first.

It's liberating. It's fucking terrifying.

"Please," Austin says, mouth smearing against Callum's, spit-slick lips gliding smoothly over one another. It's ragged, a little desperate to his own ears. He doesn't even know what he's asking for, doesn't know what he needs; all he knows is he needs something, and he trusts Callum to give it to him.

Callum captures his mouth in another kiss, petting a soothing stroke down the side of Austin's face, thumb sweeping across his cheek. "Please what?" Callum asks, words coming out in a rumble, his chest vibrating underneath Austin's hands. "What do you want? What can I do?"

Austin squeezes his eyes shut, lips twisting. He surges forward, burying his face firmly into Callum's neck. He breathes in deep, the spicy musk of Callum's body wash overwhelming the smell of skin and lingering sweat, and a shudder rolls itself through Austin's spine.

"Hey," Callum says, nose nuzzling behind Austin's ear. He rubs a hand up and down Austin's back, palm flat and fingers splayed wide. "It's okay. You're okay."

"Fuck," Austin swears, lips dragging on a patch of missed stubble underneath Callum's jaw. He presses his face in harder, like if he tries he might be able to climb right inside of Callum and not have to worry about anything else ever again. "I don't—" he starts, stumbling over an explanation for what he wants, for what's wrong, for hoping that they're not the same thing. He can't find the words, throat thick with too many things to name. "I don't *know*."

Callum presses a kiss against Austin's temple, soft and easy. It's tender and it's effortless, like Callum didn't have to think about doing it all, like it was natural, and it makes Austin's chest *ache*. Callum shifts, adjusting his hold on Austin and laying them out the couch.

"Let me know if you want me to move," Callum tells him, voice low and rough around the edges, before he carefully releases all of his body weight on top of Austin, flattening him deep into the cushions.

Austin goes boneless, face still tucked into Callum's shoulder. "You don't have to—" he tries to say, but Callum cuts him off, pushing himself up on forearms bracketed on either side of Austin's head to hover over his face.

"There are a lot of things I don't have to do," Callum asserts. Austin

blinks slowly up at him, eyelids too heavy to open all of the way, and Callum's mouth curls into a gentle smile. "I do them anyway, because I want to."

Austin swallows down a rebuttal, dropping his chin in a stiff nod that seems to satisfy Callum, because he relaxes back down. He's heavy, dead weight draped over Austin's entire body, and Austin squirms to try and settle into a more comfortable position.

Callum reaches up and plops his palm on Austin's face without even lifting his head, covering Austin's eyes and blocking out the light. He scrunches his fingers, squeezing Austin's forehead. "Stop thinking about whatever you're thinking about."

Austin splutters. "You don't even know what I'm thinking about," he says, full of disgruntlement.

"Nope," Callum agrees, "but I know you should let your brain turn itself off and not kill the rest of your buzz."

He says it so simply, like it's that easy. Callum isn't *wrong*, but Austin huffs anyway, wiggling a little more just to be contrary before he finds a position that feels good. He doesn't plan on going to sleep, doesn't remember fading out at all, but the next thing he knows he's blinking awake, legs all tangled up with Callum and the late afternoon sun casting a golden glow all throughout the living room.

Callum's weight has gone from grounding to crushing, and Austin wraps his arms around his back, hugging him tight. He hooks a leg behind Callum's knee and takes a deep breath then *heaves*, flipping them over and changing their positions. Callum yelps, arms flailing, startling a laugh out of Austin from where he's now sprawled out on top of him.

"Jesus Christ," Callum grumbles, looking up at Austin through furrowed brows. "You could have just woken me up, you know?"

Austin smiles, innocent. "Is that not what I did?"

Callum purses his lips, decidedly unimpressed. "Well, if you're not planning on moving—and please, don't move on my account," he says, tightening his arms around Austin when he goes to move. "Pass me the remote?"

"Why?" Austin asks, skeptical of Callum's plans.

"I want to watch some mindless television, Austin," Callum explains. "Background noise is good for my soul."

Austin isn't sure if Callum has an ulterior motive, but he ultimately figures any ulterior motive hinged on throwing something on the TV is harmless. He leans over and snags the remote off the coffee table, slapping it on Callum's chest. "Fine," he concedes, then lets his body slide down until he's wedged in between Callum's chest and the back cushions. "Put on whatever."

Callum lifts an arm so Austin can tuck in underneath his shoulder, and Austin curls into him, cheek squishing on Callum's chest as he turns the TV on and pulls up the channel guide. Austin is still a little fuzzy around the edges, cotton-mouthed and drowsy, so he doesn't pay any attention to the screen until Callum lets out a delighted gasp.

"This is one of yours, isn't it?" Callum asks, sounding like he already knows the answer to that question.

"What?" Austin asks, head shooting up to find Callum trying to pull up an old rerun of *The Carrie Diaries*. "Oh, no, absolutely fucking not," Austin declares, reaching for the remote in Callum's hand.

Callum holds it up out of reach. "You said I could put on whatever," he protests, pushing his free hand against Austin's shoulder and shoving him back down.

"I don't think so," Austin says, struggling against Callum's stiff arm, elbow locked out to keep Austin at bay.

Callum somehow manages to select the channel with the remote held high over his head, and Austin groans as his own voice, ten years younger, plays through the speakers.

"Oh my god, take a look at you," Callum cackles, face split open with a wide grin. "You're so *blond*."

Austin cranes his neck, leaning over to employ a last resort. He sinks his teeth into Callum's stomach through his shirt, one of the only places he can reach. The fabric sticks to his tongue.

"Did you just *bite* me?" Callum squawks, affronted, but the element of surprise works exactly the way Austin wanted it to, and Callum's arm relaxes enough for Austin to clamber up his body and make another go for the remote.

Callum doesn't let him get very far. He twists, bringing his legs up to wrap around Austin's middle, thighs crushing all the air out of Austin's lungs as Callum tosses the remote across the room in a sailing arc.

"Did you just *throw the remote*?" Austin wheezes, kicking his feet against the cushions to try and gain some leverage. Callum locks his ankles together and circles his arms around Austin's back, holding him tight in an immobilizing bear hug.

"Need I remind you who started this?" Callum asks, breath puffing hot into Austin's hair.

Austin's arms are pinned down to his side, so he really has no choice but to resort yet again to the only weapon in his current arsenal. He bites the meat of Callum's pec, jaw muscle clenching.

"Oi," Callum yelps, pulling Austin off with a sharp tug of his hair. "Play nice, will you?" he says, looking at Austin with a disapproving stare, his eyebrows and mouth wearing matching downward curves.

Austin stares flatly back, eyes briefly dropping to emphasize the confining hold that Callum has trapped him in before returning to meet Callum's gaze. The corner of Callum's lips twitch like he's suppressing the urge to grin, clinging tightly to the straight face he's putting on display.

"Oh look, there you are again," Callum says, voice breezy, turning his attention to the TV. "Look at your little *face*, you're so *cute*," he coos, ruffling Austin's hair. He combs his fingers back through it, then continues to card from root to tip in a steady rhythm, strands slipping easily between his fingers.

"You're the worst," Austin mutters, face flushing hot. He settles back into Callum's chest, letting the coiled tension he'd been holding drain out of his body. "I should fire you."

Callum makes a face, relaxing the vise-grip his legs have on Austin after it's clear he's given up the fight, but he leaves them flung over him, knee heavy on Austin's hip.

Austin rolls his eyes at Callum's pout, bottom lip protruding like an overdramatic caricature. He doesn't keep it up for very long, his focus dragged back to the screen.

"Is that—with your *teacher*?" Callum gasps. "Austin, you dog."

Austin resists the urge to full-body cringe and instead busies himself with reaching up to cover Callum's eyes, because if Callum won't let him turn it *off* the least he can do is mitigate how much Callum *sees*, but Callum bats his hands away in a slap. Austin, undeterred, tries to catch Callum's arms, fingers closing around his wrists before Callum wrenches free.

Callum wraps his arms around Austin's head and squeezes, biceps tightening enough that Austin hears the rush of blood in his ears. His legs tangle back up into Austin's, grappling to get his feet hooked and lock Austin back in place.

"If I let go," Callum says with a pant, breath coming out a hard, "do you promise to sit fucking still?"

Austin makes no such promises, and Callum lets out a heavy sigh. Austin tenses his body, strategizing the best plan of action to get himself out of this predicament when Callum continues.

"Okay, fine, how about this," Callum reasons. "Do you want to see a video of me looking like an absolute twat on stage when I was a teenager? Would that make you feel better?"

The offer catches Austin off guard, distracting him long enough for Callum to seize the chance to flip them back over in one smooth motion. It's clearly as calculated as Austin's earlier diversion tactic had been, and Austin's annoyed that he fell for it.

It's not his fault that it was an incredibly tempting offer.

Austin tries to imagine Callum at fifteen or sixteen. He wonders what kind of theatre Callum did growing up, if he was full of teen angst drama or if he sang and danced with flourishing jazz hands and a smile that was too big for his face. Austin wonders when he hit his growth spurt, if he'd shot up fast and been all long-limbed and gangly before the rest of him filled out, or if he'd been soft and round cheeked, bulking up before his height caught up.

There's no question of Callum's mass now, big and broad and pressing Austin back into the couch, fully covering him from head to toe. Austin feels a zing travel up his spine, hips rolling up before he can stop himself.

Callum smiles down at Austin, eyebrows rising up into his hairline. "Did you want to watch the video or not?" he asks, shifting his weight and pushing his thigh between Austin's legs.

Austin really fucking hates that he really wants to watch it. His expression must give it away, internal conflict playing out loud on his face, because Callum laughs, pushing himself up into a seated position and fishing his phone out of his pocket. He slides off of Austin's lap and swipes at the screen, taking a moment to type something out then scrolling again before he turns the phone to Austin in a triumphant flourish.

"For your viewing pleasure," Callum says as Austin sits up, leaning into Callum's side.

Austin lets out an undignified snort when the video starts, audio coming out tinny from the phone speakers. "Bottom?" he asks, looking up from the skinny boy in a billowing blouse on screen, proudly crowned with a donkey head, to meet Callum's eyes.

Callum's mouth unfurls into a smirk. "I'm versatile, actually."

Austin chokes, coughing to catch his breath, and Callum pats him hard on the back. Austin sends him a glare.

"Are you going to watch or not, Austin?" Callum asks with a put-upon, beleaguered voice, waving his phone back and forth. "After all the effort I put into finding this and everything."

"It took you two minutes," Austin says.

"Like I said," Callum insists. "So much effort."

Austin huffs, smiling in exasperation, but he turns his attention back to where tiny-Callum is prancing across the screen. "It's really not the same," he observes. "I can't see your face."

"You want to see my face?" Callum asks, teasing.

"You're the one who said something about a level playing field," Austin says. "This isn't exactly fair."

Callum's lips twist like he's trying not to smile. "Just keep watching."

It's over-the-top in the way all youth theatre can be, but Callum is earnest, reciting Shakespeare with as much gusto as he can impart into the words. Austin smiles softly, fondness spreading through his chest and filling him up until Austin thinks he's going to burst with it, but then Callum in the video trips, feet stumbling over themselves as he tries to keep his balance. He falls to the stage with a resonant thud,

and the donkey mask goes flying off into the audience to the sound of audible gasps. Callum gapes, wide-eyed and open mouthed in surprise, before scrambling back to his feet and continuing his lines.

Austin bites down hard on his tongue to stop himself from laughing, but one look back up at Callum's face next to him is all it takes for it to sputter out.

"So as you can see, it's still a mystery to me why my acting career never really took off," Callum says with a grin. "One of those things I guess we'll just never know."

Austin is overcome, a deep appreciation for what Callum is doing—and what he did earlier, and seemingly has an unlimited threshold to keep doing—that he doesn't know how to express. Austin knows how he can get, and every time he's braced himself for Callum to push against it, to complain or shy away, Callum has risen to meet Austin's idiosyncrasies and roll with the punches of his quirks. Callum has never looked at him funny, has never squinted at Austin's actions or called him weird, and Austin's never once felt like Callum's been thinking it without saying it. It doesn't feel like politeness, or sense of duty, or like Callum is simply trying to be nice.

Callum makes Austin feel like he doesn't have to try so hard to perform for the sake of everyone else. Callum makes Austin feel like all he has to do is just be himself. Nothing more, nothing less.

Austin grabs Callum by the jaw, turning Callum's head toward him and tipping forward to bring their mouths together. Callum smiles against Austin before softening into the kiss, slow and unhurried, just a simple slide of lips on lips.

"Hey, Callum," Austin says, hushed like he's letting Callum in on a secret. He runs his hand down the slope of Callum's neck to slot into the juncture of his shoulder, kneading at the muscle above the neckline of his shirt, watching his fingers flex and press into Callum's skin.

"Yeah?" Callum asks. He noses at Austin's cheek, pressing another quick kiss to the corner of Austin's mouth.

"Thanks," Austin tells him, throat going tight with a wave of affection.

Callum smiles at him, knowing, like he somehow already understands everything that Austin is trying to say without him needing to say it.

“Anytime, Austin.”

Austin, maybe now more than ever, wholeheartedly wants that to be true.

WATCH NOW: Austin Butler Makes the Most of LA Traffic

Like milk and cookies, or peanut butter and jelly, traffic jams and LA are two things that go hand in hand. It's not every day that you look into the car next to you and find an A-List celeb enduring it with you, but that's exactly what happened to one fellow motorist stuck in the back-up. The driver caught LA-based actor Austin Butler on video enjoying some music with the help of a friend in the passenger seat, and we sure wish we could guess what these two were singing along to. Any guesses as to what was on their playlist?! Watch the video and let us know in the comments below!

[VIDEO DESCRIPTION: Two men in a car stopped in traffic. The man in the passenger seat effusively sings along to a song on the radio, snaking his head side to side, before turning to the man in the driver's seat and leaning in close. He noses at the driver's cheek, and the driver frowns. The passenger keeps singing, smiling wide, until the driver starts laughing. The passenger says something to the driver, and the driver rolls their eyes, then starts singing along.]

Comments (203)

austinslutler passenger princess? no. passenger PERFORMANCE  

blonde4big this is the same guy as in the coachella video right? i am seeing... perceiving...

aspiringausbutexwife @**blonde4big** and the same guy as in those beach pics... ;)

blonde4big @**aspiringausbutexwife** i definitely believe those are actually austin a whole lot more now than i did when they first were posted, that's for sure

milobutler I would give my left kidney to have full audio from inside

that car

feydRAWme help??? this is the cutest fucking thing i've ever seen in my life 🥰

austinbutlersbiggestfan This seems really dangerous! Austin should tell him to knock it off. I'm surprised he's friends with someone who seems so irresponsible.

youmustbefunatparties @austinbutlersbiggestfan they're clearly stopped at a red light, chill out

austinbutlersbiggestfan @youmustbefunatparties Lights turn green? Being stopped doesn't make it right. It sets a bad example for other people, honestly. Kind of disappointing.

youmustbefunatparties @austinbutlersbiggestfan lmao tell me you've never spent half an hour in a parked car sitting through ten light cycles without telling me

Austin wakes up with a gasp, bedroom painted a dim unnatural blue by the cool light of his alarm clock. The screen glows 3:13am at him as his heart races, pounding like a kick drum, deep and heavy in his chest.

It was a nightmare, he knows it was a nightmare. He repeats it to himself, but his eyes stay unfocused, scanning rapidly around the room as he searches for something to anchor on. When he can't, he shuts them tight, clenching his hands into fists as he tries to slow down his breathing.

Outside of his window, something makes a muffled scraping sound.

Austin bolts upright, blankets pooling down around his waist. What little ground he'd managed to gain on lowering his heart rate is lost, his pulse skyrocketing. His heart thumps in his rib cage so hard that Austin feels lightheaded, on the cusp of hyperventilating.

It was just a nightmare. He knows it was just a nightmare.

He digs the heels of his hands into his eye sockets and lets out a shaky, uneven breath. He's about to reach over and flip the bedside

lamp on when another noise from outside echoes throughout the room, and Austin's whole body freezes stone-stiff, still as a statue.

It sounds like someone is outside, trying to get in.

Austin throws back the covers and darts out of bed as quickly as he can without making any sound himself, rolling through his bare feet and sneaking carefully down the hall. He stops in front of Callum's door, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth, and starts to second guess himself.

It could be all in his head, still disoriented from bad dreams. He doesn't want to bother Callum over nothing, but he'd rather apologize later than ignore something serious. Better safe than sorry.

Austin knocks softly, and Callum doesn't answer—because it's the middle of the night, and he's asleep, like a normal person. Austin doesn't want to call out, doesn't want to make any noise he doesn't have to, so he turns the knob and holds the latch open to push the door open as quietly as he can. He slips inside, closing the door behind him in the same manner he'd opened it.

Callum's asleep on his stomach, face smashed into a pillow that he has an arm wrapped around. He's shirtless, sheets falling half-off his back and leaving a plane of moonlit-pale skin on display.

Austin pads closer to the bed, laying a hand on Callum's shoulder to rustle him awake. "Callum," he whispers, nudging gently. Callum grumbles, head burying deeper into his pillow, and Austin tries again. "*Callum.*"

A muffled groan emanates out of the pillow, and if Austin wasn't coiled tighter than a spring, there'd probably be room inside him to find Callum being sleep-grumpy charming. As it is, he really needs Callum to wake up.

"Callum, please," Austin says. "Wake up."

Callum rolls over, slowly blinking open bleary eyes. "Austin?" he asks, voice rough with sleep. "Whassit?"

Austin takes a deep breath. "I think there's something—or someone—outside," he says, stumbling over the words.

Callum's eyes sharpen in an instant, his entire face steeling into determined resolve. "What happened?" he asks, climbing out of bed

and crossing the room in two long strides. He's only wearing a pair of boxer-briefs, low-slung and tight around his hips, and Austin's tongue feels heavy in his mouth when Callum opens the dresser drawer and pulls out a lockbox, turning the key and revealing a handgun.

"I woke up, and it sounded like something outside my window, like someone was trying to get in?" Austin says. It comes out more like a question than a statement, and saying it out loud makes Austin realize how much he was probably overreacting.

Callum checks his gun, hands moving in careful motions over the slide. "I'll check it out," he says, then moves to draw the curtains closed. He turns to face Austin, face imploring. "Stay here, okay? Don't go anywhere else."

Austin nods, throat so thick he's not sure he can even swallow.

Callum steps closer, a reassuring hand coming up to clasp Austin's shoulder. "It's probably fine, okay?" he says. "But if I'm not back in five minutes, call the police. Do you have your phone?"

"No, I—" Austin says, shaking his head. "I left it in my room."

"That's fine, it's okay," Callum tells him. He unplugs his phone from where it's charging on the nightstand and unlocks it, then hands it to Austin, whose fingers grip so tight his knuckles go white. "There, alright? Five minutes."

With that, he slinks out of the door, leaving Austin all alone.

Austin paces, unable to stay still. He checks the time and tries not to count the seconds elapsing as he waits for Callum to come back. The floor is cold under his feet, but he's overheated, covered in a thin layer of sweat that hasn't dried down since he woke up from the nightmare. It feels like there's a weight on his chest, crushing his ribs and collapsing his lungs, preventing him from taking in anything close to a full breath.

He tries anyway, tries to stand in one place and close his eyes and count his inhales and his exhales, but he barely gets to two cycles of in-for-four and out-for-four before he's retracing his steps, wearing grooves into the hardwood.

When he looks at the time again on Callum's phone, it's only been two minutes.

Austin climbs into Callum's bed and curls up right in the center of it, wrapping the blankets around his shoulders and pulling tight. They're still warm from Callum, and when Austin tucks his face into them he can pick up a hint of Callum's body wash, that spicy-sweet scent that's become all too familiar the past few weeks. It settles the rush of anxiety that's racking Austin's body, the surging adrenaline that felt like he was navigating white-water rapids trickling into something closer to a steady stream.

Here, bundled up in his own guest room that doesn't even entirely feel like his anymore—because Callum has laid claim to it, with his clothes strewn on the chair in the corner, his laptop on the desk, his watch and his wallet on the nightstand, the smell of him seeped into the bedsheets and into every available crack that Austin has left empty, waiting to be filled—Austin lets himself get mad.

He's furious, shaking with the enormity of how fucking unfair all of this is. How one random person has gone and thrown a wrench in his whole life, and Callum's, and potentially anyone else around him, and for what?

What's the *point*? No one's ever even bothered to tell him the extent of the threats, sparing him the details even when he'd asked. He should have pressed more, but he didn't, and nothing had happened in long enough that Austin stopped trying.

There was that time at the dog park, but other than that there hasn't really been any sign of whoever it is that has something against him at all. With weeks going by and nothing to worry about, Austin had let himself get comfortable. He fell into a false sense of security, bolstered by the ease he felt in Callum's presence in spite of what had brought Callum into his life in the first place. Sure, there had also been that one guy at Coachella who'd tried to get too close for Austin's comfort, but that felt easy enough to write off as a drunken asshole getting too touchy instead of anything more serious.

James was shiftier on the phone the other day when Austin had called for a check-in, continuing to give him the line that there was nothing new on their end and to just sit tight and be patient. Austin doesn't understand what threat could possibly be concrete enough to necessitate going to the effort of hiring a full-time private bodyguard, but is apparently nebulous enough that no one can give him any kind of real update or progress on resolving it. It feels like he's being left in the dark on purpose, that everyone knows something that he doesn't, and he hates it. He's on edge, and he knows he is, but he can't turn off

the hamster wheel inside his brain that's started to endlessly turn with worst case scenarios.

Austin looks down at Callum's phone, breath catching in his chest when he realizes it's been six minutes. His hand trembles as he swipes to the keypad to make a call, but right when he's about to start tapping in the numbers, the door creaks open.

Callum appears, and Austin's shoulders sag with relief. He pauses in the doorway, the corner of his mouth lifting into a small smile as he takes in Austin drowning in the covers in the middle of his bed. Austin takes solace in the fact that he looks unscathed and his posture is relaxed as he returns to the dresser to stow and lock up his gun.

"At least tell me it wasn't a particularly inspired racoon," Austin says, voice cracking, antsy over Callum not immediately sharing whatever he had or hadn't found.

Callum's smile goes crooked when he returns to the bed, knee-walking over to the nest Austin has made for himself. "I'll tell you it was a record-breaking sized mountain lion if it will make you feel better," he says, scooping Austin between his arms and hauling him down to the mattress, falling half on top of him.

Austin wriggles out, holding up an edge of the blanket for Callum to slide underneath. Callum does without any further prompting, scooting close and dragging Austin back into him when Austin stays put.

"I didn't see anything," Callum tells him, fingertips tracing lines up and down Austin's back. "No signs of anyone or anything outside, no signs of attempted entry on your window."

"So I'm just crazy," Austin mumbles, turning to hide his face in Callum's shoulder.

"Nah," Callum reassures. He runs his hand up into Austin's hair, scratching at his scalp. "Just stressed, I reckon."

Austin sighs, the crashing adrenaline leaving him exhausted. He doesn't know if he could move even if he wanted to, but with the way Callum is massaging out all the tension at the base of his skull, he really doesn't want to.

He lifts his head, tired eyes meeting Callum's alert gaze. "Can I stay?"

“Yeah,” Callum breathes out. He leans forward and drops a soft kiss on Austin’s forehead. “Don’t think I’d let you leave, honestly,” he says, lips gazing over Austin’s eyebrow with every word.

Austin’s heart skips a beat in his chest as Callum pulls him snug into his side, hand threading back through Austin’s hair. Austin nestles his nose into the notch underneath Callum’s jaw and breathes deep for the first time since he woke up.

The way they fit together, the way Callum’s hands feel on Austin’s body, is its own kind of revelation. It’s as significant as the things Callum tells him, all the words Austin can’t bring himself to voice out loud rolling off of Callum’s tongue as easy as anything. The look in Callum’s eyes, protective and trusting and exasperated and patient all in equal measure, all wrapped in a warm fondness, bathed in baby blue. Every single one of his smiles, from small and crooked to wide and beaming, and the way they light up his face. The way he smiles *at* Austin with that look in his eye.

Austin wants him. He wants everything about Callum, every way he can get it. He wants Callum in his bed every night, not just when Austin’s gone and worked himself up over nothing. He wants the heat of his body, the scintillating touch of skin on skin. He wants Callum to be there in the morning, with messy hair and pillow creases sliced into his cheeks. He wants to take Callum out during the day, to hold his hand in front of everyone, and to bring him home again and again.

Austin wants to keep him.

It might be a little fucked up, how he got Callum in the first place, but Austin isn’t going to cower in the unknown. He isn’t going to kowtow to a faceless specter, to stay inside and hide, no matter how much he’d honestly rather stay home than be seen more often than not.

Austin isn’t going to let anyone take his life from him. Even if it’s being threatened, Austin isn’t going to stop himself from living it.

He’s not going to let them win.

WATCH NOW: Austin Butler Plays Along with Kiss Cam at Kings-

Ducks

[...] The kiss cam appeared to start to zoom in on Austin's guest and a woman sitting next to them, to which the man turned to look at Austin with an awkward flush, indecision clearly visible in his expression. Austin proceeds to make an interesting face of consideration that only becomes understandable when he pulls the man in and lays a kiss on him instead. [...]

[VIDEO DESCRIPTION: A man with dark blond hair grabs the chin of the man sitting next to him at a sporting event and then kisses him after the prompting of the kiss cam on the jumbotron. The arena roars in the background, and they break apart after a moment, smiling at each other before the camera cuts to a different couple in the crowd.]

Comments (569)

kingme YOOOOOOO CROSSOVER EVENT OF THE CENTURY

wheelsnipecelly @kingme absolutely rare ducks w for sure. and butler landed himself a fuckin rocket? i am impressed

goducksgo @wheelsnipecelly it's not too late to atone for your sins and see the light

blonde4big oh my GOD? oh my god ☐

bennyandthebikes well i did not have "slipping each other some tongue at a hockey game" on my bingo card for them as a way to go public but man, what a way to go

wormstache laughing my ENTIRE ass off at austin's face when he clocks the kiss cam but then it starts to zoom in on His Man and the girl next to them. buddy. baby. stake your claim a little louder, why don't you

jumbofan1968 As a new fan of this talented young man, I have to say this is so disappointing.

majorgaylecleven @jumbofan1968 ok grandpa time for bed

ausbutt @jumbofan1968 dude go spout your bullshit somewhere else. or don't, actually. consider shutting the fuck up completely!

dicktrick69 @jumbofan1968 stop giving hockey fans a bad

name with your close minded shithousery, bud

austinsboyfriendsmustache @jumbofan1968 ❖ nobody asked
❖

jumbofan1968 @majorgaylecleven @ausbutt @wheelsnipecelly @austinsboyfriendsmustache Oh, my mistake! I should clarify the disappointment comes from Austin being a Ducks fan and not from his choice in partners, because he appears to be an otherwise upstanding gentleman. I'm greatly looking forward to watching him in Masters of the Air!

dicktrick69 @jumbofan1968 listen, tall dark and yankees hat over there forgot what coast he was on let alone what sport he was watching, but good for them. give em enough time and maybe they'll come around to the better team.

aspiringausbutexwife @austinbutlersbiggestfan WHERE YOU AT?

austinsboyfriendsmustache @aspiringausbutexwife they couldn't conjure up a single platonic explanation for this one

Austin gets a little twitchy after that night.

Callum is quiet on his feet, and Austin has a tendency to get tunnel vision, laser-focusing on whatever task is at hand until the rest of the world falls away. After the countless time Austin jumps out of his skin, startling from the sound of Callum's voice or catching sight of him out of the corner of his eye when he's not expecting it, Callum fixes Austin with a long look.

"What?" Austin asks when Callum's eyes narrow into something calculating.

"Go change into something comfy, then meet me in the backyard," Callum tells him.

"I'm comfortable?" Austin questions, looking down at his loose t-shirt and jeans in confusion.

"No, like workout clothes," Callum clarifies, disappearing down the hall into his room before Austin can ask anymore follow-up questions.

Austin sighs, sliding a bookmark in between the pages of his book before closing it. Callum rarely tells him what to do when they're at home, following Austin's lead most of the time even when Austin tries to get him to reveal really controversial opinions, like what he wants to have for dinner. Austin figures he should positively reinforce the behavior he wants to see, so he changes into a pair of gym shorts and sneakers before heading into the backyard without any fanfare.

Callum isn't there yet when he goes outside, so he throws himself down into the lounge chair by the pool that Callum usually sits in, kicking his legs out in front of him.

The door slides open a few minutes later, Callum wandering out after doing a wardrobe change of his own.

"Is that my shirt?" Austin asks, squinting at the familiar threadbare tank top, fabric worn thin and arm holes stretched so wide Callum might as well might be wearing a shirt at all.

"Is it?" Callum responds, shrugging as he looks down at the cracked and faded logo, like he hadn't paid it any mind when he put it on.

Austin raises a skeptical eyebrow, but the thing is—well, they've been living together for long enough now that Austin has started thinking about it in terms of months instead of weeks, and Callum's socks have ended up in his drawers a few times, laundry mixing and mingling because sometimes it's just easier to do one load instead of two.

It's not outside the realm of possibility that Austin's shirt ended up in Callum's pile, but the fact that he put it on anyway flares something hot low in Austin's belly.

"You're in my chair," Callum says, closing the distance between them to stand with his hand resting defiantly on his hips.

"Am I?" Austin returns, pitching his voice to mimic Callum and making a show of looking down and around. "Didn't see your name on it anywhere."

Callum grins. "What a coincidence, since I didn't see your name on the shirt I found in my basket, either."

Austin purses his lips, but a response stays held on the tip of his tongue when Callum unceremoniously drops down onto his lap, knocking the air out of Austin in an audible *oof*. "Was that really necessary?" he asks, strangled, hands coming up to steady himself on

Callum's thighs.

"I wanted to sit in my chair," Callum retorts, an insouciant set to his shoulders. "It's not my fault you're in my chair."

Austin pinches at the exposed skin on Callum's leg, unimpressed. Callum lets out a yelp when he squeezes, and Austin chuckles. "Aw, sweetheart," Austin rasps out, so achingly sweet that Callum rolls his eyes. "Did that startle you? Was it annoying?"

"Speaking of," Callum says, taking a firm detour on where Austin was driving the conversation, "I asked you to come out here for a reason."

"Do tell."

Callum takes a deep breath, like he's taken the time to think about what he's going to say before now and wants to get it right. "I wanted to talk to you."

A shallow wave of dread starts lapping at Austin's feet, but he doesn't let himself wade deeper into its waters. "And that required changing clothes?"

Callum claps both of his hands on Austin's shoulders. "So, I can't help but notice that you've been freaking out more than usual the past few days."

"I'm not freaking out," Austin argues, mouth pulling down into a frown.

"Austin. Babe," Callum says with an amused smile, kneading at Austin's shoulders. "Be honest."

Austin huffs, eyes cutting over to stare off at the side of the house. At his bedroom window. "Okay," he reluctantly concedes. "Maybe I've been freaking out a little."

"It's understandable," Callum assures. "Shit's fucked, and you've been remarkably chill about everything so far."

Austin doesn't know how to tell Callum how much of that is because of *him*, so he doesn't say anything at all.

"It's okay to feel spooked," Callum continues, "but now you have to ask yourself: what are you going to do about it?"

It's a great question, and it's one Austin doesn't know the answer to.

Lately it's like all he's been doing is not knowing things, and it's a feeling that he's getting tired of. "I take it you have a suggestion?" he asks, wringing his hands on Callum's knees.

Callum's eyes glitter. "Wanna learn some self-defense?"

It's not at all what Austin was expecting him to say, but once the offer is presented, Austin gets what Callum is trying to do. All things considered, it's far from the worst idea Austin's ever heard.

"Yeah, sure," Austin says. "Why not?"

Callum springs up off of Austin's lap, holding out a hand to help Austin up. He doesn't need it, but he takes it anyway; Callum's hand is warm in his, forearm flexing as he hauls Austin up to his feet.

"So first and foremost, the best move with the highest success rate," Callum begins to explain, "is running the fuck away."

Austin gives Callum a dubious look, and Callum throws his arms out to the side, gesturing broadly.

"I'm serious! If you're somewhere and something feels off, just get the fuck out of there. If someone tries something, your first priority is to try to create space and distance so you can proceed to run the fuck away. Especially if you're unarmed and they have a weapon," Callum says. "You're not going to win bare-handed against a knife or a gun."

It's not new information. Austin does know that, at least, but hearing it said out loud when he's suddenly living in a context where it might become relevant makes his jaw clench as he swallows around a lump in his throat.

Callum's face softens, and he gives Austin one of his reassuring half-smiles. "Now, failing that, or if someone gets the jump on you and gets you in a hold, there are a few things you can do." He holds up three fingers. "Eyes, nose, throat," he says, and after tilting his head, he holds up a fourth, "and groin. Those are your target areas—the vulnerable areas."

"Yeah, a good old fashioned kick in the dick," Austin mutters, hand scratching at the back of his neck.

"Hey, it's a classic for a reason," Callum admits. "That also means it's something someone might expect to see coming, so it helps to throw in a little subterfuge to distract your target."

Callum steps closer to Austin, miming a good old fashioned kick in the dick. “Instead of just going right for it,” he says, “you can throw your hands up, drawing their attention away from your lower body. They’ll hopefully be focused enough on blocking a punch that you can land the hit. I’d go for a knee, myself.”

He demonstrates as he talks, and Austin slips into learning mode, watching and listening intently as Callum explains the pros and cons of a punch over striking with the heel of his hand or throwing an elbow. He’s a good teacher—better than Austin, anyway—straightforward with his descriptions, giving Austin just enough information that he understands without overwhelming him with technicalities.

“When it comes to getting out of holds,” Callum says, “you want to let gravity be your friend, and don’t be afraid to move your hips. Can I show you?”

Austin nods, and Callum wraps him up tight, pinning his arms down by his sides with a strong squeeze.

“To get out of this, for instance, just drop and go dead weight,” Callum tells him. “Go on, give it a try.”

Austin does as he’s told, collapsing on himself and dropping like a rock to the ground. Callum doesn’t entirely let go, but the rapid shift in weight gives Austin enough room to work with to get free by shoving at him a little more.

“Good,” Callum remarks, nodding in approval. “What you really want to avoid is getting caught by the neck, but if they do get your head, you can turn to the side and try to twist out of it. You want to get your hands between whatever they have you with and your neck so you can breathe. Use whatever you can—kick the shit outta their shins, step on their toes, be petty as hell. You’re not fighting for honor. You’re fighting for your life.”

Austin snorts out a laugh, and Callum throws him a smile like a kid winning a prize at the state fair. Callum can always find a way to make Austin laugh, even in moments that feel bleak. He’s a bright light, illuminating everything around him, casting a warm glow on the parts of Austin that feel perpetually shrouded in darkness. Not enough to blind him, but enough that Austin can find his way to the exit of the poorly lit cavern in his mind whenever he finds himself getting too lost in its depths.

“So,” Callum says, after they’ve run through several holds and practiced a variety of escape tactics. “Ready for your practical exam?”

He tackles Austin to the ground before Austin has time to process what’s happening

Callum knocks all the air out of Austin’s lungs when he falls right on top of him, toppling Austin over with ease. Austin wheezes, limbs jostling to find a position where he can gain an advantage. He pushes at Callum’s torso, his hand accidentally sliding underneath his shirt through the arm hole until he’s grabbing a handful of Callum’s pec in an attempt to force him off. The fine layer of hair on Callum’s chest tangles between his fingers, and Austin takes the opportunity presented to him and pinches his nipple, twisting it roughly between his fingertips.

“Fuckin’ dirty bastard,” Callum hisses, chuckling to himself as he wrenches Austin’s hand away with a firm grip around his forearm. “Good for you that I like it.”

Austin brings a knee up and lodges it against Callum’s stomach, rolling away when Callum gasps and goes slack. He clammers onto hands and knees and starts to crawl away, but he doesn’t get very far when he feels the bend of Callum’s elbow wrap around his throat and drag him back down to the ground.

“What are you gonna do, Austin?” Callum pants in his ear, arm tightening around his neck. It’s not enough to actually choke him, but it’s enough that Austin has to fight to get a breath, windpipe compressed by Callum’s bicep. “Are you just gonna take it?”

Austin is going to take everything he can get even if he ends up regretting it later, but he doesn’t think that’s what Callum means right now.

He forces his fingers between his neck and Callum’s arm, kicking his heel into Callum’s shin and spinning around so they’re chest to chest. Austin gets his knees on the ground and tries to push himself up, but Callum yanks him back by his shirt before he can get anywhere, hooking a leg around Austin’s hip to drag him down again.

They collapse in an awkward collision of limbs, Callum’s elbow digging into Austin’s ribs

“Remember,” Callum reminds him. “Create space.”

Before he's done talking, he uses the leg he has around Austin to flip them over again, getting his hands around Austin's wrists and pinning them above his head when he's knocked off balance by the change in position. Austin bucks his hips up, feet planted firmly in the grass, and he sucks in a harsh gasp when he ruts against Callum and realizes they're both hard.

It should be an even bigger incentive to create some space between them, but distance is the last thing that Austin wants.

Callum is staring down at him when Austin opens his eyes, holding himself lethally still. Austin bites down hard on his lip, and Callum doesn't move. He doesn't move when Austin curls his hands into fists, testing the grip Callum has on him. It's strong enough that Austin would still have to work to get free—Callum isn't backing down.

He's solid, a brick wall of muscle bearing down on Austin. He doesn't move when Austin tries to tug his arms free; the heave of his chest is the only thing keeping him from being entirely motionless. He's coiled tight, ready to strike, and the crushing weight of him sends an involuntary shiver down Austin's spine.

Austin is pretty confident there's one foolproof way to get Callum to move.

He arches his back, letting his legs fall open as he grinds up into Callum's hips. A thick wave of pleasure rolls through him from the friction, but it's nothing compared to the punched-out moan that falls out of Callum's mouth, a low sound reverberating from the back of his throat.

Callum shoves his thigh between Austin's parted legs and rocks into him, drawing a long groan out of Austin. He squeezes Austin's wrists tight enough that the bones grind together, head dipping down to whisper in Austin's ear. "Creative tactic," he muses, breath puffing hot on Austin's jaw. "Can't say I would approve of it against an assailant, but I'm willing to be convinced."

Austin turns his head to the side and smashes their mouths together, teeth clacking with the force of the kiss. Callum sucks Austin's tongue into his mouth, releasing Austin's wrists to clutch the side of his head, hands fisted in his hair. Austin smiles into the kiss, biting Callum's lips before taking advantage of the moment and scrambling out from under him.

The sudden escape causes Callum to careen face-first into the ground,

grunting on impact. Austin climbs onto him before he can regain his composure, flattening his chest against Callum's back. "You're the one who said don't be afraid to move my hips," Austin tells him, nipping at Callum's earlobe. "But it's a special tactic, reserved for special occasions."

Austin thrusts down, dick rubbing along the curve of Callum's ass, and he chokes on a gasp when Callum pushes up into him. His body moves of its own accord, possessed by the kind of untamed desire that Austin hasn't felt in a long time.

They're dry humping like teenagers who just discovered what their bodies can do for the first time, all semblance of self-defense training discarded, when Callum's phone goes off, a ring tone distinct from the one that Austin's heard before blaring out loud across the back yard. "*Fuck*," Callum swears, a visceral frustration tangible in his voice. "I have to—it's work, Austin, I have to get that."

Austin rolls off him without another word, sprawling out on his back as Callum pushes himself to his feet to answer the call, disappearing into the house with a serious set to his face. Austin stays where he is for a brief moment, then he reaches down to adjust himself in his shorts and flees to the bathroom.

He strips, leaving a pile of soiled clothes on the tiled floor before turning on the shower and spinning the knob so the water is as hot as he can stand it. He looks down at his dick, flushed dark red and standing at attention, and chews on the inside of his cheek.

Jerking off to his bodyguard somehow feels like crossing some kind of invisible line even though they've been all but tap-dancing right on top of it the whole time, tearing it to shreds. Austin is pretty sure that if Callum's phone hadn't gone off, they would have gotten each other off right there in the grass in his backyard instead.

Fuck it.

Austin steps into the shower, a billow of steam surrounding him, thick and humid. He tilts his head back, letting the water run through his hair and sluice over his skin in streams of stinging heat. He still doesn't feel like he's caught the breath that Callum knocked out of him when he'd bodied Austin into the ground, forcing all the air out of Austin's lungs and filling him up with something else in wake.

The need is overflowing, an uncontrollable current that's threatening to flood everything it surrounds. Austin is drowning in it, and he lets

it pull him down into the undertow, leaning forward to brace his forearm against the wall. He reaches down to fist his dick in his hand, squeezing at the base, and doesn't even pretend to think about anything other than Callum.

He groans in relief at the first touch, head falling down to hang heavy between his shoulders as he gives himself a slow pull, stroking up and over the head. He's so keyed up he could probably shoot off in half a second if he wanted to, but he doesn't. He drags it out, teasing himself with careful fingers and easing off when he gets too close to losing it.

A shudder ripples through Austin's spine, eyes falling shut and mouth dropping open in a gasp when he thinks about Callum's hands, what it would feel like if it was Callum's broad palm and long fingers on him instead of his own. If Callum were in the shower with him, Austin thinks Callum would walk Austin right up to the wall, chest pressing flush against Austin's back. He'd reach around, hand flattening on Austin's stomach and holding him close.

Maybe he wouldn't go for Austin's dick right away. Maybe Callum would tease him, too, the way Austin's teasing himself. He'd run his hands all over Austin's wet skin, glide over his ribs up to his chest, tweaking one of Austin's nipples just to see how he'd react.

Austin's hips stutter as he thrusts into his fist, and he bites down a low whine. His abs tense, muscles clenching in a spasm as he fights his climax. He thinks about Callum mouthing at his shoulder, teeth scraping across his skin as he leaves a trail of open-mouthed kisses along the side of his neck.

He comes in a rough grunt when he imagines Callum grinding his dick, long and hot and hard, up against the crease of his ass. It splatters across the shower wall, and Austin blinks at it in a daze, breath coming out in ragged bursts as he rides out the shockwave.

His whole body tingles, from the top of his head all the way down to his toes. He tilts the shower head to rinse off the wall, washing all the evidence of his wayward thoughts down the drain. He takes his time with the rest of his shower; the water beats down on his back, soothing out the soreness in his shoulders that's become a new baseline these days.

He's wrung dry, turned inside out, and he doesn't know where he's supposed to go from here, well past the point of no return. He doesn't know how he's supposed to go back to his living room and sit next to

Callum and pretend not to want him while he's pretending to want him. He doesn't know what the point of all the pretending is even for, anymore.

He's not sure if there was ever even a point to begin with.

His conversation with Ashley sticks in his mind, niggling like a hangnail, like torn skin he can't stop fussing over.

Would it really be so wrong, to just let himself have this?

Chapter 3

Austin Butler Gets Cozy with Close Friend

Austin Butler appears to be enjoying his time off! In these photos taken from his LA home, the actor looks to be soaking up the sun during some quality time by the pool with an unidentified friend. Readers and commenters all across social media are dying to know the answer to one question that's been on everyone's minds: who exactly is this mystery man?

[IMAGE DESCRIPTION: A man with curly dark hair wearing a tank top with wide-cut arm holes and short blue gym shorts is perched on top of a blond man on a lounge chair. The man on the bottom has his hands resting on the man on top's thighs. Their heads are curled toward one another, mouths open as if they're mid-conversation.]

Comments (471)

elvisgrl00 wow. i love thigh.

aspiringausbutexwife 🤔☐☀☐🔥👑💀

SERIOUSLYWHOISTHAT and how is he so broad?? @science i demand answers ☐

wilohms now WHEN is everyone going to stop calling that tall drink of water his f R i E n D, i swear to god i'm gonna mcfuckingloseit

hedgehogboy @wilohms it's a courtesy thing. even though it's obvious at this point, no publication is going to come out and say it until he says it himself, which he hasn't yet.

aspiringausbutexwife @hedgehogboy honestly it's probably more to cover their asses for libel than courtesy, but either way you can almost kind of appreciate it, in a weird way

wormstache @hedgehogboy heh. come out

austinsboyfriendsmustache Jesus H Christ someone take me out back and put me down

askingforafriend me and who... me and who when...

kyddingaround i am literally speechless holy shit

austinbutlersbiggestfan It's so nice to see some real examples of male friendship these days!

austinsboyfriendsmustache @ austinbutlersbiggestfan please that man is SITTING in his LAP and they look like they are two seconds away from fucking right there on that lounge chair

ausbutt now on the one hand there ain't NO reason for a man to have a waist like that, but on the other hand it's REAL fucked up that these look like they were taken from his back yard without him knowing? like, leave him alone in his own home, for the love of god

blonde4big @ausbutt yeeeeeah, as much as i can't lie and say i don't love to see it, these feel pretty gross. they're not in public here like all the other times

Austin shifts his weight in the makeup chair, unable to sit still. He only has a short day today, easing back into appearances with a quick interview and photo spread to start drumming up some buzz before the Masters of the Air press tour kicks off in earnest, but it's the first time he's really stepped out of the bubble that he's retreated into during his break. He'd had to wake up early after staying up too late last night, and the disruption to his routine has him out of sorts, but it's probably only another hour or two before he'll get to go back home so he grits his teeth and bears it. The public engagements are only going to start increasing soon, so he needs to re-acclimate himself to the process.

Callum is posted up at the smoothie bar next door waiting for him. He'd offered to stay, but since Austin has his usual team with him he had waved Callum off, figuring that he would appreciate the break even if he was hesitant to leave. It's the first time they've truly been apart from each other since this whole thing started, and Austin isn't sure how he feels about the fact that it really doesn't feel like it's been that long. He hasn't gotten tired of Callum being around, and he feels unsettled with him gone. It's ridiculous, especially given that he's only a wall away, but somehow it's different than when he's off in another room when they're at home alone.

It should be a glaring sign that Austin should try to pump the brakes on his feelings, a bright red flag waving high and warning danger, but

Austin just wants to go back home and sit in his corner of the couch while Callum sits in *his*, and coexist. No one else around, no one else hovering and watching his every move. Just two people sharing space in perfect symbiosis, fitting into each other in a way that feels like they've always been there.

Austin is so much lighter when he's with Callum. The cloud of anxiety that continuously seems to linger over him feels thinner, sunlight poking through and shining down instead of being blocked behind overcast skies. For all of the looming unknown, the uncertainty of their relationship and the daunting knowledge that there's still someone out there who is apparently trying to hurt him, Austin is somehow the happiest he's been in a long time.

Once makeup finishes with him, Austin is shuffled over to the filming area where the interviewer is already waiting for him. She stands as soon as Austin approaches "Hi, I'm Maria," she says, extending a hand out in greeting. "It's so nice to meet you."

Austin takes it with a warm smile. "Likewise."

She smiles broadly at him in return as they sit and the camera starts rolling, her pink lip gloss shining under the bright light pointed in their direction. "So," she says, hands clasping together in excitement. "I have to start by acknowledging the elephant in the room, what everyone's been asking about. Did you know you've been causing quite the stir online recently?"

Austin projects a sense of guilelessness that he doesn't really possess in the moment, scratching behind his ear. "Have I?" he asks. "I don't really pay attention to that kind of thing," he says, which for all intents and purposes is true, even if he's well aware of what she's trying to get at.

Maria's face goes sly, a knowing look glittering in her eye. "Well, I've seen a lot of rumors swirling about your dating life lately. Is there anything you want to say about any of that?"

Austin can't think of much that he would rather do less. He runs a hand over his chin, squeezing at his jaw. "Not particularly," he says, but he pairs it with another smile, ducking his head to soften the blow.

"Fine, fine," Maria acquiesces with a laugh. "Let's talk about this new show then, shall we?"

Austin's smile widens. "That's what I'm here for."

"So, obviously your character goes through a lot in the course of the show," Maria says.

"Yeah, I think it's pretty safe to say that."

Maria shuffles the note cards she's holding in her hands. "We have some questions that were submitted by our readers, and Jilly281 writes: *This show seems intense! Was any of it scary to do? If not, what's your biggest fear?*"

"Wow, you're really starting off with the tough ones, huh?" Austin jokes, laughing it off and buying himself some time.

He's scared of a lot of things, none of which he's going to bring up in an interview. He's afraid of wasting his potential. He's afraid of taking the easy way out, of squandering opportunities that he should seize. He's terrified of making the same mistakes twice, of sabotaging himself, being the one to hurt himself so he doesn't get hurt by someone else.

It's something Austin has been thinking over ever since his conversation with Ashley, tonguing at the space all of his shortcomings leave like a lost tooth. He knows what she'd say, but knowing it and believing it are two different things.

He can't let himself be scared forever. He can't keep getting by on what he can reach through a cracked door, scrabbling for something at arm-distance. If he wants something real, he's going to have to tear the whole door down, rip it off its hinges and reduce it down to studs.

Austin doesn't say any of that. "Well, I think anything can be scary if you think about it too much," he says. "What scares you?"

"Oh, gosh," Maria replies, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I hate heights, you know?"

Austin hums. "Is it the heights themselves, or is it the fear of falling?"

Maria makes a face of consideration. "I think it's both!" she decides. "I definitely don't like being high off the ground, but then I can't help but think about what would happen if I fall."

"That makes sense," Austin says with a nod.

“Anyway,” Maria pivots the conversation back to the interview, looking back down at her note cards. “CoolKid99 wants to know what your favorite part of filming was.”

Austin starts rolling through his internal script from there—the show, the characters, what it was like, what he’s excited for people to see. He laughs in all the right places, throws in a few jokes, and turns up the charm before posing for photos. It’s over before he knows it, but he’s still ready to face plant into bed and take a two hour nap by the time it’s all said and done.

And then he gets to do it all over again tomorrow.

WATCH NOW: Austin Butler Emphatically Does Not Deny Dating Rumors

In conversation with *Entertainment Tonight*, Austin Butler took his usual approach in deflecting personal questions, but unlike past statements, there was a distinct lack of denial in response to certain rumors surrounding the star’s relationship status that will have many fans paying close attention. Is an official announcement on the horizon? Subscribe and stay tuned to be the first to know!

[VIDEO DESCRIPTION: A man in a casual jacket and dark jeans sits in a folding chair, ankle crossed over his knee. He frowns when he’s asked a question. “I’ve said before that I consider my personal life personal,” he says, pausing and rubbing a hand across his mouth. “It’s something that is important to me to stand by. As far as I’m concerned, whoever is in my life is only my business, and theirs. Nobody else’s.” He smiles, then, small and almost unthinkingly. “I can say I’m happy, though. Things are good.”]

Comments (699)

austinsboyfriendsmustache SHAKING CRYING SCREAMING
THROWING UP PASSING OUT

majorgaylecleven oh we LOVE to see love win 🌈

calluhhhhhhm i’m frothing at the MOUTH. look at his face after he says “whoever is in my life”!! that little smile!?! aaaaaaaahdskjfsn ☐



mastersofmyass omg not the pronoun game.... i really never thought i would see the day but here we fucking are??? girliepops if this isn't proof to never stop believing then i don't know what is

lovedontcaustathing oh he is SMITTEN smitten. I'm weak

austinbutlersbiggestfan See? If what all of you were saying was true, he'd confirm it. I have no idea why you're celebrating a denial.

aspiringausbutexwife @austinbutlersbiggestfan your willful delusion is almost impressive <3

austinbutlersbiggestfan @aspiringausbutexwife Stop stalking and harassing me or I'm going to report you.

lovedontcaustathing @ austinbutlersbiggestfan my guy they literally kissed in front of thousands of people at that hockey game the other day what more do you need

austinbutlersbiggestfan @lovedontcaustathing It must be really sad that you feel like you can't kiss any of your friends. Besides, that was prompted and he's an actor, what do you expect?

austinsboyfriendsmustache @ austinbutlersbiggestfan there was TONGUE!!!

Callum hasn't said more than two sentences to him all day.

Austin had woken up late, and Callum was nowhere to be found when he finally staggered into the kitchen to put on a cup of coffee. He appeared when Austin was in the middle of scrambling some eggs, but only long enough to nod at Austin and toss a *let me know if you need anything* over his shoulder before slinking off again.

It wouldn't be weird if it weren't so outside of their usual norm, such a clear deviation from the status quo that they'd been maintaining. Austin mulls it over as he assembles his breakfast burrito, shoving more protein than he'd previously thought possible in it at the behest of his trainer.

He doesn't know if it was the interview—a tacit official

acknowledgment of their pseudo-relationship, for all that Austin had been oblique in his answer. He'd kept himself up all night worrying that things might change between them after it got heated in the backyard, but he wouldn't have guessed that they'd change in this direction.

Austin tries to busy himself with looking over some new scripts that James had sent over, but by the time lunch rolls around, he finds himself knocking on Callum's door.

"S open," Callum calls out, and Austin nudges the door in. Callum is propped up against the headboard, laptop balanced precariously on his knees as he types away on the keyboard. He glances quickly up at Austin when he opens the door before his eyes drop back to the screen.

"I was going to take Milo on a walk soon," Austin says, hands shoving into his pockets. He'd ask if Callum wanted to join in general, but given that he doesn't really have a choice, that particular pleasantry seems moot. "Want to go to the café around the corner, get some sandwiches?"

"Yeah, sure, two secs," Callum mutters, distracted by whatever he's doing on his computer.

Austin nods stiffly to himself and goes to fetch Milo. He tosses a ball up and down the hallway while they wait, the scampering click of Milo's paws echoing out off the hardwood.

Callum comes out a few minutes later, and Austin clips Milo into his leash as Callum slides his shoes on. It's maybe a twenty minute walk to the café, the perfect out and back distance to stretch their legs a bit. Warm sun beams down on Austin's skin, and he takes a deep inhale of fresh air, laughing under his breath as Milo dramatically flops down to roll in the first patch of grass he sees.

He looks up at Callum, who's watching them with a soft smile on his face. Something in Austin's chest twists, and he knows he's probably overthinking, but he still can't shake the feeling that something is wrong.

"Busy morning?" Austin asks once Milo gets his fill of the grass and continues trotting along next to them.

Callum turns up the brightness on his smile, but Austin doesn't think it quite reaches his eyes. His gaze is distant, like he's not fully here in

spite of the pleasant expression on the rest of his face. Then in almost an instant, Callum blinks and everything transforms, and it's like nothing's changed at all. "Yeah, just catching up on admin stuff, you know how it goes," he says, knocking his shoulder against Austin's.

Austin sucks the inside of his cheek between his teeth and bites down so he doesn't ask what the hell that just was. It sticks in his mind, like a splinter wedged deep under his skin, that maybe Callum is a better actor than he'd given himself credit for.

Maybe Austin pushed him further than he was prepared to go in the backyard. Maybe it got too real, then, for Callum to continue the charade they'd been playing.

The café has a walk-up order window and umbrella-covered tables spread out across an open patio, so it's a regular spot for Austin, somewhere he can grab a coffee or a bite to eat when he's wandering around with Milo. Austin smiles at Jen, the girl behind the counter, as he approaches.

"Hey there," she greets. "The usual?"

Austin nods. "Yeah, and a chicken wrap? And then whatever he wants," he says, tipping his head towards Callum and handing her his card.

Jen slips him a dog treat and a wink when she gives the card back, and Austin leads Milo off to the side and out of the way. Callum finishes ordering as he crouches down, telling Milo to sit before giving him the treat.

"Austin, dollface!" a familiar voice calls from a nearby table.

Austin stands up, whipping around in surprise. "Tom!" he says, a wide smile splitting his face open. "I didn't know you were in town."

Tom strides across the patio and wraps Austin up in a crushing hug, leaning back to pull Austin off of his feet. Austin laughs, hands braced against Tom's shoulders, and Tom slaps a wet kiss to his cheek when he puts him back down. His arm stays slung around Austin's neck, and he gives Austin a shake, eyes flicking over to Callum before settling back on Austin and asking, "How are things? It's been an age."

Austin rubs at the side of his neck, tugging at his ear. "Uh, good," he says. He looks over at Callum, standing off to the side and studying the two of them with a blank expression on his face. "This is, um. This

is Callum, by the way,” Austin adds.

“Ah, yes,” Tom says, snapping his fingers and pointing at Callum. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

Austin squints at Tom’s words. He hasn’t spoken to Tom in months, so he’s not sure if Tom is just trying to ensure that Callum doesn’t feel excluded from this conversation, or what.

“Lovely to meet you,” Callum says with a tight, close-mouthed smile.

Tom’s eyes glint, scanning over Callum with a calculating stare. “Where’re you from, mate?”

Callum stands up taller, unfolding from his slouch to rise to his full height, towering over Tom. “Chelsea.”

“And you’re keeping this one out of trouble, yeah?” Tom says, a casual grin slanting across his face as he squeezes his arm around Austin’s neck.

Callum reaches out and snags Austin by the belt loop, pulling him out from under Tom’s arm and into his side. “Oh, I do what I can,” Callum says, eyes crinkling with a smile so fond that Austin’s heart clenches in his chest. “But he’s not too much trouble.”

He drops a tender kiss on Austin’s temple. Austin curls his hand into a fist, nails biting into his palm as he leans into the touch, turning to brush their noses together before he takes a half-step away.

It hurts in a way that Austin wasn’t expecting, the jump from Callum avoiding him all day to witnessing him turn up the charm like a switch has been flipped. He’s never noticed it so clearly before now—maybe because Callum always kept himself toggled on, and Austin just never saw through it—but seeing behind the illusion now, seeing the performance for what it must be, leaves a sour taste in Austin’s mouth.

Austin can’t even find it in himself to be angry, to feel misled, because he was the one who brought this to the table in the first place. Callum only followed Austin’s lead, and it’s not his fault that Austin feels empty now, like he’s been hollowed out and drained dry.

Tom is looking between the two of them with a shrewd set to his eyes, and it doesn’t go unnoticed by Callum, who opens his mouth like he’s about to say something only to be interrupted by their order being called. “I’ll get it,” he says instead, deflating as he heads to the

counter.

Austin lets out a sigh, releasing a breath that had been held in his chest. He rubs a hand over his cheek, pinching at his bottom lip between his fingers.

“I think you and I need to have a little catch-up, darling,” Tom says, fixing Austin with a pointed stare as Callum saunters back to his place beside Austin, juggling two coffees and a to-go bag. “Call me later, yeah? Maybe we can go for a ride before I have to leave.”

Callum’s eye twitches as Austin takes his coffee, the corner of his mouth sloping incrementally down into a frown. He doesn’t step away like Austin had, standing close enough that his body heat seeps into Austin, a long line of warmth radiating into Austin’s side that makes the back of Austin’s knees prickle with sweat.

“Do you even have a bike here?” Austin asks, to which Tom makes a dismissive noise.

“Minor details,” Tom scoffs, flapping his hand. “I’ll make it work for you.”

Callum places a hand on the small of Austin’s back, palm pressing flat against his shirt. Austin smiles at Tom, and Callum’s fingers twist into the fabric.

“Yeah, for sure, I’ll let you know,” Austin says. “It was good to run into you.”

Tom grins, lopsided. “Always, Austin,” he agrees. “Always.”

They part ways, and it’s only when they start the walk back home that Austin realizes Callum hasn’t said a single word since he got interrupted with their order.

He wishes he knew what Callum was going to say.

The entire interaction sits wrong with Austin. It itches, that same splinter stuck under his skin, a foreign body somewhere it doesn’t belong.

“You didn’t have to do all that, you know,” Austin says, breaking the silence. “It was just Tom.”

Callum frowns again, taking a long sip from his coffee. “I don’t know

what you mean.”

Austin lets it go, but when they get home he doesn't give Callum the chance to make himself scarce. He retreats into his room with his chicken wrap and Milo hot on his heels, carefully eating sitting cross-legged in the middle of his bed, Milo curling into a small ball in the corner.

He picks up his journal from its place on his nightstand and flips to the next empty page, uncapping a pen and pressing the tip to blank paper. He starts scribbling mindless lines, abstract shapes just to get his hand moving, drawing out the shadows from the back of his mind with the more ink he lays down on the page.

Austin tries not to think too hard about it, but it's probably not the best method given that when he finally processes what he's drawing he's left looking at a near-perfect rendering of the angle of Callum's jaw. He stares at it, tracing the pad of a finger over the rough lines of where the juncture of Callum's neck meets his shoulders. The lines are dissonant with the subject, harsh and jagged where Callum should be soft sloping curves.

It's not right, no matter how torn up Austin feels inside.

He sighs, flipping the page. He trades his pen for a pencil.

The next time Austin tunes back into himself, two hours have gone by and the fading light coming in through the window tinges everything dusk-blue. His hands are smudged with graphite, fingers darkened charcoal grey.

Callum's eyes are smiling at him on the page.

Austin runs a hand through his hair, tugging on the ends. He can't hide from this anymore—it's undeniable how much he feels. How much he *wants*. It's too much and not enough, all at once.

He wants all of it. Everything. He wants the slow mornings with Callum, sleep-rumpled and dancing around each other in the kitchen, as much as he wants the press of their bodies together in bed at night. He wants the late afternoons nestled on the couch, limbs woven together to the point where he doesn't know where he stops and Callum starts. He wants the shielded feeling of having Callum by his side, a strong and steady screen, a shelter that Austin can always find respite in. He wants the way that Callum makes him laugh, face scrunching up with the force of it, and the pleased expression on his

face whenever he makes Austin lose his composure.

It's more than he can keep locked away inside himself, and only getting to have it half-way, a mockery of what he really wants, comes nowhere close to alleviating all the want that's buried so bone-deep it feels like it's etched its way into Austin's DNA and become a permanent fixture of what makes him *him*.

He's going to have to talk to Callum sooner rather than later, if only to be let down gently so he can start tending to his wounds and trying to move on.

Later that night, he finds himself lingering in the dim light of the hallway outside of the bathroom, leaning against the wall as Callum brushes his teeth.

"Oh, hey," Callum says once he comes out and finds Austin loitering. He reaches out like he's going to touch Austin, but his hand pauses mid-air, hesitant in a way that he's never been before.

"Is everything okay?" The question falls out of Austin's mouth before he can stop himself, unable to keep pretending that everything feels normal.

The kind of smile that ought to be reassuring takes shape on Callum's face. "Everything's fine."

"Are you sure?" Austin asks, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth.

Callum closes the space between them, stepping over the gap like it's a crack in the sidewalk and not a yawning chasm carved deep into their landscape. He reaches up and cups Austin's jaw with confidence, thumbing over Austin's lower lip until Austin releases it from his bite.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Callum tells him, which isn't the same as *there isn't anything wrong*, but Austin still feels the tight coil of anxiety unspool itself in his chest. Callum doesn't look like he's saying it just to say it, just to quell Austin's apprehension. He looks earnest, clear blue eyes glowing warm in the soft cast of the light. Austin's eyes drop to his mouth, full lips crooked at the corner. It's not even half a smile, but something about it puts Austin's mind at ease more than the megawatt grin Callum had given him before.

Carefully, Callum dips his head and kisses the edge of Austin's mouth, a barely-there press of their lips together. Austin's breath hitches,

caught in his throat.

“Goodnight, Austin,” Callum says, parting with a squeeze of Austin’s chin.

Austin stays glued to the spot, feet anchored firmly in place as he watches the span of Callum’s back retreat down the hallway.

Austin Butler Takes Dog on a Neighborhood Stroll

Rising star Austin Butler, an actor well on his way to becoming a household name if he isn’t already, was yet again seen with the man that has the entire Internet in a tizzy. Everyone is desperate for more information on both who he is and what, exactly, his relationship with Austin is. Today, the pair were photographed walking Austin’s dog Milo looking comfortable and at ease in each other’s presence—and we’re not saying anything, but we can only dream of finding someone who makes us smile as much as these two always do at each other!

[IMAGE DESCRIPTION: Two men holding iced coffees walk side by side down a tree-lined sidewalk. One, wearing a hoodie, has a smile on his face and holds onto the leash of a small dog. The other, in dark sunglasses and a t-shirt, appears to be laughing.]

Comments (357)

mrsbutler421 he looks sooooo soft and comfy and they’re SO cute together i’m !!! ☐

zippybrews man I will say I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen Austin look so happy so often, and it makes ME happy to see. I’m glad he’s found someone who makes him smile like that, plus it looks like the feeling is mutual.

milobutler So are they living together now or what? Have we even seen Austin out by himself or with anyone else in the past few months?? I can’t decide if it’s really sweet or kind of crazy

austinsboyfriendsmustache @milobutler yeah i’m definitely so curious about how long they’ve been together before they started being so lowkey public about it? they act like they’ve been

together for years. i'm obsessed.

austinbutlersbiggestfan @milobutler I definitely think it's starting to get weird, especially since no one knows who he is? I'm getting concerned that he's taking advantage of Austin's kind heart and generosity.

austinsboyfriendsmustache @austinbutlersbiggestfan have you considered touching grass?

ausbutt i thought they were holding hands in that second picture and i yelled so loud i scared my cat

lovedontcaustathing @ausbutt no but look at the third picture —is austin's hand in his back pocket or am i crazy???

ausbutt @lovedontcaustathing omg

ctcallme so is anyone else seeing the HICKEY on that man's neck??? fuckin get it, austin 🤔🤔🤔

austinbutlersbiggeststan @ctcallme i don't know what you could possibly be implying, EYE JUST THINK it's so obvious that he probably ran into a vacuum, you know how often that can happen. a perfectly mouth shaped vacuum. with his neck.

austinbutlersbiggestfan @austinbutlersbiggeststan Real original.

James texts him three times to remind him about the suit fitting.

Austin forgot about an appointment once when he was twenty-four and he can apparently never live it down—he probably should have double-checked his calendar before going on that spur of the moment hike, back then, but leaving the tailor stranded outside of his empty house for over an hour was a mortifying enough lesson that Austin had learned without James needing to continuously rehash it ten years after the fact.

He's answered the door promptly for Gianni ever since.

"Austin, my boy!" he greets effusively, pulling Austin into a hug. "I

have some excellent things for you today, I cannot wait for you to see.”

Sandra has already taken over his living room, shoes and accessories covering nearly every available surface. She'd brought some pieces off-the-rack, an oversized garment bag stuffed full of shirts, but the suits are always Austin's favorite part.

Callum's deep in conversation with Sandra when Austin wanders back in with Gianni in tow; his eyes had lit up when he'd seen what was on the schedule for today, tentatively asking if he could stay and watch.

“My mum was into fashion when I was growing up,” Callum had explained. “One of her friends owned this clothes shop, and she'd take me along sometimes. I always liked seeing how things would come together, you know?”

And who was Austin to say no to that request? It felt like a tiny step forward from the way they'd been tiptoeing around each other, inching towards progress.

He can feel Callum's eyes on him as he tries on piece after piece, switching out different combinations of shoes and shirts with each suit Gianni pulls out. Sandra likes the blue one the best, a slim-cut richly saturated navy that tapers in at the waist and hugs close to his frame. Austin prefers the beige double-breasted jacket paired with a wider leg pant, and he spins in front of the mirror, tilting his head in consideration.

“What do you think?” Austin asks, turning to face Callum.

Callum blinks like he's surprised to be addressed. “Me?”

“Yeah,” Austin nods. “Which one do you like better?”

“The blue one,” Callum says immediately, no hesitation. “If you want to make people lose their minds? The blue one.”

Austin turns back to the mirror, cheeks heating pink. The beige suit is a little oversized and doesn't show off the lines of his body the way the blue one does, but Austin is comfortable in it; he likes the way it falls, the drape of the fabric.

Callum seems to sense Austin's indecision. “Could you—and tell me to shut up at any time,” he interrupts himself, glancing over at Sandra and Gianni before fixing his attention back on Austin. “These were

bespoke, right? Could you get a different style of trousers to go with the blue?"

Austin can imagine it easily; the navy jacket cropping close at his waist, but the silhouette opening out with more movement in the leg of a different pair of pants. It's a good idea, and he meets Gianni's eyes in the mirror. "Could you do that?"

"Pfft, easy, no problem," Gianni says, shrugging off the ask like it really isn't any trouble at all.

Sandra looks back and forth between Callum and Austin with her hands on her hips and a twinkle in her eye. "If you don't keep this one, Austin, I might have to."

"Sorry, you can't have him," Austin says with a breezy delivery, the *he's mine* left unsaid but still clearly apparent.

Austin still needs to talk to Callum. He can't even say that he hasn't had the time, because he's had plenty. Every time he's been presented with an opening to bring it up, he puts it off, telling himself that the conversation can wait. It's not sustainable, and he knows it's his own fault that he's forcing himself into navigating this no-man's-land of uncertainty. He knows he could alleviate all of his doubts by putting all of his cards on the table and asking if Callum felt the same, but he's not sure he's prepared for the outcome if he doesn't get the answer he wants. He doesn't want to shatter the delicate balance they've managed to find again.

At least this way he can still have a little bit of Callum, even if he doesn't have all of him. It's not enough, but it has to be enough for now.

"You have a suit, right?" Austin asks, abruptly cutting off whatever conversation Callum was having with Sandra that Austin hadn't been paying attention to.

"I mean, *a* suit, sure," Callum says slowly. "A good one is a different question."

"Well that's just no good at all," Gianni interjects before Austin can reply. "If you are standing next to him, we also need you in the best, no?"

Callum glances back at Austin, looking lost. "I'm not sure I—"

“Come, stand, stand,” Gianni says, pulling Callum up and out of his chair with two hands grasping his shoulders. “Let me measure you.”

“Uh, given the profile of the event,” Callum says, scratching at the back of his neck. “I was planning on carrying.”

“Carrying?” Gianni asks. “What would you need a bag for? Don’t you people have people for that kind of thing?”

Callum laughs, but it’s thin, and he drops his head to stare down at his feet. “I’m not you people,” he says. “A weapon, sir. I’m just security.”

“Cal—” Austin starts, because there’s nothing *just* about Callum, but Gianni beats him to the punch.

“Nonsense,” Gianni says. “Do you have it? I can measure you with it, see what I can do.”

Austin watches the muscles in Callum’s throat work as he swallows, nodding a little stiffly before he heads in the direction of his room. Austin runs a hand through his hair before turning to Sandra and trying to get back on to the topic at hand.

“So,” he says. “The blue, then?”

She’s already a step ahead of him, holding out a hanger with a sheer navy shirt. “Take that off and put this on.”

Austin slips the beige blazer off of his shoulders before starting on the buttons of the white shirt they’d tried with it. He’s halfway into the new shirt, unbuttoned and hanging loosely by his sides, when Callum comes back into the room.

He’s donned a shoulder holster, black leather straps standing out in sharp contrast against the crisp white fabric of the dress shirt that he’d put on underneath it. It highlights his shoulders, framing them in a way that’s downright obscene.

Jesus.

“Well, that should be fucking illegal,” Austin says under his breath, so taken by the sight of Callum he doesn’t even realize he’s said it out loud until Callum frowns at him.

“I have a license?”

Austin pinches the bridge of his nose and kicks himself for letting the

thought slip. “I, uh,” he says. “I meant your shoulders.”

Sandra snorts, and Austin busies himself with buttoning the new shirt, face burning red-hot under the scrutiny.

A smug smirk stretches out across Callum’s mouth, and he stands a little taller, shoulders rolling back and chest puffing out. It’s a downright devastating combination, and he’s only in sweatpants and his shirtsleeves. Austin isn’t sure he’s going to be able to handle him once he’s poured into a suit that fits him like a second skin.

“Your shoulders *are* already so big,” Gianni tuts, coming up behind Callum and wielding a measuring tape like its own kind of weapon. Austin covers his mouth, coughing to suppress a laugh. He can’t say he’s ever taken umbrage with Callum’s width the way that Gianni seems to be. “Can’t you put it somewhere else? Under your trousers? That’s a thing you can do, right?”

The tips of Callum’s ears go pink, but Gianni doesn’t even give him the chance to answer the question before he peeks up from behind Callum’s shoulders to address Sandra.

“What do you think for him, hm?” Gianni asks. “Black? Grey?”

Sandra crosses her arms over her chest as she looks at Callum, scanning him from head to toe. “Something classic, definitely. Pinstripes?” she asks. “No. Keep it simple and clean, I think. Dark charcoal.”

Austin tries not to watch as Gianni manhandles Callum about, recording all of his measurements in a small notebook, but he catches Callum’s eyes right as Gianni kneels down to take his inseam, muttering to himself. Austin’s lips twitch with the faintest impression of a smile, and Callum quietly grins back at him. His eyes are wide and round, like he finds all of this surreal, something that Austin can’t fault him for.

All of this is so objectively absurd, but Austin doesn’t think there’s anyone he’d rather be going through it with. It’s hard to imagine his life without Callum in it now that he’s planted himself in it. Austin let Callum put down roots in his soil and they’ve grown deep, spreading and intertwining, and Austin thinks it’d destroy all of the ground around him if he has to dig him up and tear him out.

Austin changes back into his own clothes as Gianni finishes, and Sandra types away on her phone, making notes of the choices they’d

landed on before packing everything up and scheduling a second fitting for the following week.

The day of the premiere sneaks up on Austin, always coming faster than he thinks it will. James had suggested getting ready at a hotel to minimize the number of people at his house, and Callum had been quick to agree, but Austin wanted to be comfortable in his own home. They'd compromised by keeping the prep team as small as possible, whittling it down to Sandra, her assistant, and a makeup artist and hairstylist that Austin has worked with several times before.

Callum rushes into the room as Sandra is fussing with Austin's shirt, making sure the built-in oversized ties along the deep cut of the neckline are tied in a bow that's *the perfect amount of undone without being sloppy*, or whatever it was that she'd said she was going for.

"Austin, do you have—" Callum starts to say, stopping short when he sees Austin half-dressed. He's not fully in his own suit either, the cuffs and collar of his shirt unbuttoned, his wrists and collarbones peeking out from behind the fabric. "Wow, okay."

"What?" Austin asks, self-consciously smoothing his hands down his stomach as Sandra starts laying out his jewelry, shirt sheer enough that it merely provides a wash of color over bare skin more than any actual coverage. The effect will be softened once he has the jacket on, but without it he feels more than a little exposed.

"I was going to ask if you'd seen my tie," Callum says, socked feet padding across the room to stand next to Austin. "It wasn't in the bag, so I wasn't sure if it had been mixed up with yours."

"It was just a plain black tie, right?" Austin asks. Callum nods, and Austin opens the top dresser drawer that he keeps all of his ties in. He pulls out one that's matte black, unrolling it and holding it up for Callum. "Will this work?"

Callum looks over to Sandra like he's silently asking for permission, and she shrugs, nodding in approval. "That's fine."

Austin steps to stand in front of Callum, looping the tie around the back of his neck and fixing where his collar had gone askew. He does up the last remaining buttons and starts working on the tie, adjusting the ends to the appropriate length.

"You look fucking amazing, by the way," Callum says in a low whisper.

Austin flicks his eyes up to meet Callum's, and his fingers fumble as he finishes the knot, cheeks flushing warm under Callum's appreciative gaze. "Yeah?" Austin asks. "You think so?"

"Don't act like you don't know what you look like," Callum tells him, a playful smirk turning up his mouth.

"You don't clean up half bad yourself," Austin says, sliding the knot snug up against Callum's neck once he slips it through. He doesn't immediately pull away, hands settling on Callum's chest.

"I should let you finish getting ready," Callum observes, but he makes no effort to move.

Sandra is the one to break the moment. "Yes, and you need to, too," she announces. "The car will be here in twenty."

They break apart, and Austin dutifully puts on the rings and necklaces that Sandra hands over to him before stepping into his boots and slipping into the jacket. Callum is ready and waiting by the door when they get there, and the sight of him takes Austin's breath away.

His wild curls have only been loosely tamed, smoothed out without being flattened. The suit, a grey so dark it's almost black, accentuates the span of his shoulders and makes him look even broader than he already is. The pants hug his thighs, and his long legs stretch on for days. Austin can only barely make out the faintest break in the line of his jacket, and that's only because he's looking for it. He'd never notice that Callum had anything underneath it if he wasn't already aware, and the fact that he *does* know sends a thrill through him, in on a secret that no one else is privy to.

Callum opens the door for Austin and they slide into the backseat, legs pressed firmly together. Austin twists his rings back and forth, trying not to pick at his nails before they hit the carpet lest he be yelled at by no fewer than four different people. Callum grabs his hand after a few minutes, tangling their fingers together and quelling Austin's fidgeting.

Austin takes a deep breath and blows it out, closing his eyes and letting his head fall back into the headrest, the vibrations of the car rumbling through his body. Against all odds and somehow circumventing the hell that always is LA traffic, they arrive sooner than later, and then it's suddenly showtime.

"I'll meet you inside, alright?" Callum says as the car rolls to a stop,

squeezing Austin's hand. He tries to let go, to let Austin open the door and step outside without him, but Austin doesn't.

"Can you—" Austin starts, then stops, rephrasing. He's clutching Callum's hand so tight he can't feel his own fingers. "Do you want to come with me?"

The plan was for Austin to walk the carpet alone and for Callum to follow just behind, hidden out of sight in the mass of PAs and stylists and everyone else working the event. When it's finally time to go, though, Austin doesn't want to open the door.

Callum looks at him, gaze intent. "Are you sure?" he asks, as serious as Austin's ever heard him.

"Yeah," Austin confirms, voice shakier than he'd like but resolute in his conviction. "I want you to."

"Okay," Callum says, nodding without any hesitation. His eyes unfocus for a brief moment as he mentally reassesses the situation, then he snaps back with clarity. "Let's go then, shall we?"

Everything goes by in a dazed whirlwind from there. In the back of his mind, Austin knows dragging Callum out here with him is a choice that he's not going to be able to walk back, even more than everything up until this point. This won't be just an offhand reference in an interview or a blurry pap shot of them holding hands. It's not a candid of them walking next to each other down the street, or kissing on their own time.

This is going to be him and Callum at a high-profile public event, smiling with their arms wrapped around each other, every single moment captured and recorded in high definition to be studied by the masses. As far as everyone else is concerned, this is going to make it official.

The world explodes around them as soon as they step out of the car with their hands linked, arriving to a cavalcade of blinding light and booming noise. Austin can't hear anything specific, all the yelling from photographers and interviewers alike clamoring together, a chaotic rush of sound assaulting his ears.

Callum unlaces their fingers to settle his hand on Austin's back, the press of it heavy and reassuring as he rakes soothing patterns over the thick fabric of Austin's suit jacket. He nudges Austin onward, walking down the length of the carpet before taking another moment to pose

at the end.

Austin turns, leaning in to murmur in Callum's ear as the flashbulbs blaze, camera shutters clicking in a cacophony all around them. He can feel the strap of Callum's holster through the back of his suit, and he slides his hand up and down it, thumb tracing a line along the edge of his scapula down to the center of his spine. "You regret any of this yet?"

Callum's eyes soften. "No," he says, face open and voice honest. "Not a second of it."

Austin thinks he might actually believe him.

They make their way inside and find their seats, and Austin has never been able to decide if he hates this part more than all of the pomp and circumstance outside. He's never liked watching himself on screen, but at least with this he only has to sit through an hour long one-episode preview instead of the entire duration of a feature film.

He still can't look at his own face whenever it's on screen, but he shifts his attention to what he can appreciate—the score, the color grading, the shot framing, how everything comes together to tell the story—and in no time at all the credits are rolling.

The premiere is only the first half of the night, though, and the afterparty is just as much of an obligation for him to attend even if he'd rather call it an early night and retreat back to the safety and security of home.

Leaving the theatre is almost more chaotic than when they made their entrance. With the backdrop of the red carpet removed, paparazzi line the sidewalk, leaving only a narrow strip of concrete between the back door and where their car is waiting to take them to the party. Austin keeps his head down, eyes locked on his feet as he walks.

Callum's hand stays on his back like an anchor, a grounding touch that guides him to where he needs to be. They pile into the car and camera flashes burst through the windshield, bright lights bouncing off the glass and dazing Austin even through the tinted windows. Callum moves into the middle of the back seat, angling his body toward Austin and holding his hand up to block Austin's eyes from the onslaught. Austin usually doesn't get overwhelmed by all of this, at least not as much as he used to when he was younger, but the sea of people outside has him feeling frayed at the seams.

There are so many of them, and Austin doesn't know who any of them are. He couldn't make out any of their faces even if he did, and the weight of being surrounded by strangers after weeks of navigating the world with suspicion and wariness is all coming to a head.

He just wants to go home.

"Hey," Callum says, settling a hand on Austin's thigh to draw his attention. "Austin. Look at me?"

Austin looks up, eyes glazed. He blinks Callum into focus, face so close he'd barely have to tip forward for their noses to brush.

"Hey," Callum repeats, smiling Austin's favorite smile. It's the one that starts out small, just a tilt of his mouth, then spreads across his whole face until he's nothing but teeth and rounded cheeks, eyes crinkling at the corners from the force of it. "There he is."

Callum grabs his chin and twists until he's almost entirely facing backwards, shielding Austin from view with his torso. There's a part of Austin that knows this is just throwing fuel on the fire, giving everyone a shot to talk about even if they can't make out the details. He should push Callum over to his side of the backseat and give them nothing at all, but when he reaches up to grab onto Callum's wrist, he doesn't pull Callum's hand away.

He grips Callum tight, keeping him in place. Callum squishes his cheeks before running his hand down Austin's neck to cradle the back of his head, fingers threading through the hair at his nape. The roar of the paparazzi starts to die down as the car drives away, flashes fading to faint bursts of light in the distance.

"What do you want to do once we're done with all this?" Callum asks, mindlessly toying with Austin's hair.

"Honestly?" Austin says. "I could murder a fucking burger."

Callum shakes with a laugh, brilliant and beautiful, a sound that Austin doesn't think he'll ever get tired of hearing. "I need you to know," he says, barely above a whisper, like he's making a confession. His eyes lower to Austin's mouth and then rise again, holding Austin's gaze as he presses their foreheads together. "You're the most incredible person I've ever met."

The words hit him like a punch, knocking him out and leaving him winded. His voice is hoarse when he tells Callum, "You should ask me

what else I want right now.”

“What do you want, Austin?” Callum asks, breath ghosting over Austin’s lips, and Austin can’t breathe at all.

It’s like all the oxygen has been sucked out of the car, abandoning him in a vacuum, unable to sustain himself on anything other than the intensity of the moment. He needs more, needs the air from Callum’s lungs like life support.

“I want you to kiss me.”

When Callum closes the distance between them, it’s not a shock of a kiss. It’s not the glaring intensity of a thousand-watt light bulb, and it doesn’t zip through Austin’s skin like static electricity. It’s a slow-growing warmth, like the first rays of a sunrise emerging from beneath the horizon. Callum’s lips are soft and plush against his, like curling deeper into his pillow and burrowing under the covers on a late-morning lie in. Callum kisses him softly, carefully, but there’s a familiarity underneath it all that realigns Austin from the inside out, putting all the pieces of him that had come undone back together again.

Austin sighs into the kiss, falling into it completely. It’s comfortable and easy, and Callum’s hands on him are steadfast, an unwavering refuge when everything around him feels like it’s in disarray. It feels like relief, like solace, like somewhere Austin can go when he doesn’t have anywhere else.

It feels like home.

The driver clears his throat and Austin breaks the kiss with a gasp, hiding his face in Callum’s shoulder as he catches his breath. He hadn’t even noticed that they’d stopped moving, or that the car had parked. Callum squeezes the back of his neck, and he quirks a smile at Austin when he looks back up. Austin returns it, dumb with all of the tenderness that’s radiating out of him, so much affection spilling out that it’s probably visible from space.

Callum offers his hand, and Austin takes it, and they step out together for the second time that night.

WATCH NOW: Red Carpet Official?! Austin Butler and his Mystery Man Make their Premiere Debut

Keen eyed fans have noticed Austin Butler gallivanting all around town with the same tall, dark, and handsome friend the past few months, from coffee runs and dinner out to walks around the neighborhood and sand-swept beach dates. The *Bikeriders* actor has played it coy when asked about the rumors surrounding his love life in interviews despite being seen kissing for the cameras at a recent hockey game, but it looks like this duo has finally made their red carpet debut! Austin joined the cast and crew of *Masters of the Air* in celebration of the show's release, but love seemed to be the only thing in the air for the actor as he only had eyes for his plus one as they posed for the cameras. You can count us as part of the growing horde on the edge of our seats waiting to see what the new couple gets up to next.

[VIDEO DESCRIPTION: A man wearing a bold blue suit smiles for flashing cameras on a red carpet. A second man, standing beside him wearing a dark grey suit, leans down to whisper something in his ear. The man in the blue laughs. The man in the grey places a hand on the man in the blue's lower back, and they pose together, both smiling at each other.]

Comments (896)

saveabikerideabikerider 🚨🚨🚨 SOUND THE FUCKING ALARM
OMFG 🚨🚨🚨

austinsboyfriendsmustache god callum is SO HOT. but can we talk about him scritching austin's back? they are how i know that love is real actually :')

aspiringausbutexwife @austinsboyfriendsmustache SHHHH
don't say his name out loud on here don't ruin this for us

austinsboyfriendsmustache @aspiringausbutexwife please
they're posing on a red carpet wrapped around each other i think
the cat is officially out of the bag. i'm honestly surprised the
article doesn't identify him, like, we ALL been know by now.

majorgaylecleven ugh they both look so happy i am going to EXPLODE !! !!

turnmeover !!👤!!👤!!👤!!👤!!👤!!👤👤👤👤🌪️👤👤💥👤👤👤

turndownforwhat @turnmeover TURN NATION R I S E 🙌

caustinmecrazy @turndownforwhat @turnmeover 🤔☐☐

austinbutlersbiggestfan It's SO refreshing to see Austin take his friends to events like this!

aspiringausbutexwife @austinbutlersbiggestfan when are you going to go away

austinsboyfriendsmustache @austinbutlersbiggestfan what happened to not trusting that man or his intentions???

The afterparty is already in full swing by the time they show up.

There are somehow more people here than there were at the premiere, but Austin knows how these things go—those who want to be seen without sitting through the actual premiere, or didn't get invited in the first place.

Austin loses track of how many hands he shakes and hugs he accepts while Callum hangs over his shoulder, his presence a constant reassuring shadow. Austin gives himself an hour; long enough to make the rounds without it being too obvious that he's cutting out early when he bails.

He wants to take Callum home and finally finish what they started. He's buzzing with it, a shot of adrenaline rushing through his veins, the only thing spurring him and keeping him going.

"Oh my god," Callum says, and when Austin glances over at him, he finds Callum's mouth parted open.

"What?" Austin asks, craning his head to scan the room, trying to find what has Callum so surprised.

"Nothing," Callum answers too quickly. Austin raises an eyebrow, and he huffs. "It's just—that's Tom Hanks."

"Yeah?" Austin confirms, a little confused. Tom is standing a few tables over, locked in a conversation with Barry. "And?"

"It's *Tom Hanks*," Callum insists, waving a hand in an abstract gesture.

Austin snorts, amused at seeing him so star-struck when he's mostly rolled so smoothly with everything else that Austin's life has thrown at him so far. "Do you want to meet him?"

Callum pales. "Christ, I don't think so," he says, voice faint.

Tom looks up and catches Austin's eye, and then he and Barry are walking over before Austin can do anything about it. "Well," Austin says. "You might not have a choice."

"Do you want something to drink?" Callum asks abruptly. "Water?"

Austin laughs, but he gives Callum the out. "Yeah, okay," he says, smiling fondly as Callum flees to the bar. He catches up with Tom and Barry, and Nate and Anthony, and Raff and Ben and Adam and an endless stream of everyone who passes by their cluster off to the side of the room, people continuously rotating in and out as they make their own rounds.

Callum quietly slips back into the spot next to him, the moment away apparently giving him enough time to brace himself, because he's back in top form as soon as he reappears. He knows exactly how to balance a conversation, make himself known without dominating or taking over the space. Austin sips the water Callum brought him and sits back, simply enjoying watching him interact with everyone.

"Here, let me," Callum says, taking Austin's empty glass when they finally find a moment of respite. Austin gets waylaid by yet another bout of small-talk as Callum heads back to the bar, but he manages to extricate himself after only a few minutes.

He stills when his eyes land on Callum, elbows resting on the bar and smiling at a woman that Austin doesn't recognize. She's leaning into Callum, too close to write off as casual when she twirls a long lock of hair between her fingers and looks up at him underneath her lashes.

Austin doesn't blame her for trying, but he certainly isn't going to let her *keep* trying.

He's about to walk over and insinuate himself next to Callum when the one voice he's been afraid of hearing all night calls out from behind him.

"Austin," Josh says, quiet enough that it doesn't draw any attention. It's only for Austin to hear.

Austin closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He's been dreading this, stress levels rising to an unsustainable level as the date of the premiere inched closer and closer. He'd made sure that he'd be one of the last ones to arrive on the carpet, doing his best to ensure that whenever he saw Josh again, at least it wouldn't be in front of hundreds of cameras.

It still didn't prepare him for this moment.

Austin pivots on his heel, slowly turning to face Josh. He looks—good. The dark curls that Austin spent the better part of a year messing up are smoothed out, slicked back in a neat coif. The fabric of his suit is crisp, completely covering the body that Austin had pressed into every surface of their respective rooms when they were in England, and had pressed him back in return.

He's looking at Austin like he isn't sure he wants to be here either, a line of tension weighing down his shoulders. He's holding his spine too-straight, like he's half a second away from making a beeline towards the nearest exit, and it's a feeling that Austin can relate to.

"Hey," Austin says, lame to his own ears. He shuffles on his feet, throwing another quick look over his shoulder to check on Callum before he forces himself to look Josh in the eye.

Josh stuffs his hands into his pockets and gives him a wry smile. "You finally lost your bodyguard."

Austin's eyes widen, and all the background noise around him dissipates, ears ringing like he was standing too close to the blast zone of a bomb detonating. He blinks, but Josh doesn't give him anything else to go on, just keeps on staring at him with flat eyes and his lips twisted in a self-deprecating grin. "What?"

"Your—boyfriend, or whatever," Josh explains, shrugging and breaking eye contact, looking down at the floor. "He's been glued to you all night."

Austin's shoulders drop down from where they'd hiked up into his ears when he realizes Josh is just joking, that he doesn't *know*. "Oh, yeah, I," Austin starts, but never quite finishes, tugging on his bottom lip like if he pulls hard enough he'll be able to pull out the right words.

"That's new, huh?" Josh asks, eyebrows rising halfway up his forehead. "I gotta say, I was surprised to see you with someone like

that.”

“Listen, Josh,” Austin says, lowering his voice and taking a step closer. He doesn’t want to do this here, surrounded by all these people, but he doesn’t want to brush Josh off either.

He deserves better, after what Austin put him through.

Josh holds up a hand, shaking his head. “Don’t strain yourself,” he interrupts, biting out the consonants. “I can take a hint.”

“It’s not—” Austin says, roughly running his fingers through his hair, probably fucking up the artful dishevelment that had taken half an hour to style and tipping the scale toward full-on unkempt.

He’s struggling for the words, at a complete loss for where he’s even supposed to start. Then there’s a strong arm wrapping around his waist, and Josh is pasting a strained smile on his face. The air around them thickens, charged with all of the things that are being left unspoken, questions unasked and declarations swallowed down. Austin’s hackles have never been higher. He’s all too aware of the fact that between the three of them, he’s the only one who has all of the information. He’s the only one not working off of assumptions, or relying solely on smoke and mirrors.

Callum’s hand comes to rest low on Austin’s hip, fingers splaying down the front of Austin’s thigh. It feels possessive, like it’s a move meant to undeniably claim, and Austin tries not to stiffen in his hold. It’s too obvious, and Austin wants to tell Callum that he doesn’t have to lay it on so thick; if he tries too hard, people won’t believe it at all.

They’ll see right through the act.

Austin leans into Callum, smiling in a way he hopes is convincing. “I was starting to think you got lost.”

“And we can’t be leaving Austin alone now, can we?” Josh asks, looking right past Austin at Callum with a challenging set to his jaw. “You never know what kind of ideas he’ll get into his head when he’s left to his own devices,” he adds, the nonchalant tone at complete odds with the cutting way his eyes slice to meet Austin’s gaze.

The words hit him like a slap to the face, but the worst part is that Josh isn’t even being unfair. He’s not saying anything that Austin doesn’t deserve to hear, and the guilt that Austin has been pretending that he hasn’t been carrying around for the past year starts to claw at

the inside of his throat, tearing his larynx into ribbons and ripping his vocal cords raw.

Callum's face goes carefully blank, like he's intentionally shuttering his expression and pushing down what he's genuinely feeling. It feels like effort. Like artifice.

Austin still can't make heads or tails of it, the way Callum had so suddenly started shying away from him at home but keeps being all hands when they're in public, pushing and pulling at Austin like a yo-yo even when it seems like he'd rather not. Every time Austin thinks he's landed on the right conclusion, he's yanked back in the opposite direction, never quite able to reconcile what he thinks is the real truth.

He'd thought they'd finally been on the same page, but now he's not so sure. All of the anxieties that have been plaguing him come rearing back ten-fold, exponentially worse. The ground feels like it's been pulled out from underneath him, and the peace he'd started to find, the understanding that he thought they'd arrived at, is burning into cinders and leaving nothing but white-hot coals standing in the remains.

Austin never got around to initiating a real conversation with Callum, no matter how well-intended he'd been, and now he's back in a mess of his own making. He's starting to think that maybe he does need all those reminders from James and Ashley and everyone else that he'd sworn weren't necessary.

Maybe he never learns his lessons after all.

Because the thing is, what Austin had with Josh could have been good if he'd let himself have it. It had *been* good until Austin talked himself out of it and ran, afraid of what would happen if he let himself think of them as anything other than casual.

Wanting something casual is the line he gave Josh, at least. Even though he knew it wasn't entirely true, he'd fallen back on the excuse, making Josh believe that something real was never his intention when Josh had started pushing him for more.

The shame is suffocating, surrounding Austin from all corners, unavoidable and inescapable. A profound irony permeates through it; Austin intimately understands what Josh must have felt back then, because he's put himself through the ringer with Callum. He knows what it's like from the other side, now.

Callum squeezes his hip, fingertips pressing in just on the edge of too deep. The perfect amount to draw Austin back out of his head. "I came over to let you know the car was ready," Callum tells him, ignoring Josh entirely.

Austin feels like he's underwater, everything muffled and distorted, his body uncoordinated and reacting in half-time. "Great," he says, nodding at Callum.

When he looks back up at Josh, he's met with a pair of sad, rueful eyes.

"I'm sorry," Austin says, imparting all of the sincerity in the apology that he's capable of at the moment. "I know you probably don't believe me, but—I am. I mean it."

Josh sighs, heavy and resigned. "I know you are," he admits. "That's the fucking annoying part of it all, Austin."

Austin knows it's nowhere close to being resolved, but now isn't the time or the place. He's going to have to fix it, but it can wait until another day. He silently follows Callum outside, tongue caught between his teeth. It feels heavy in his mouth, burdened with all the things he still needs to say, every confession that he's been holding back and biting down.

He can't get a read on Callum, sitting pasted against the door on the opposite side of the back seat. Callum is looking resolutely out the window, and Austin can't quiet the part of his mind that's telling him it's because Callum can't bear to look at him. It's the same song and dance that they've been running through lately, performing the routine until Austin's voice is shot and his feet are aching. Hot and cold, back and forth, over and over and over again.

He's getting tired of it. He's ready for the curtain to fall, and the show to be over.

When they get home, the sound of the door closing echoes out through the house, cavernous in the dead of the night. Austin kicks his shoes off and leaves them by the door, throwing his jacket over the back of the couch.

"Are you okay?" Callum finally asks, the first words he's spoken since they left the party.

Austin has been stewing, ruminating and spinning himself in circles on

the entire drive home. There's one thing that's still bothering him. One thing that he's been wondering, and isn't sure he's going to be able to let go.

"Why did you really take this job?" Austin asks, barely recognizing himself as the question bubbles out of him, doubt and paranoia carving deep-set grooves into him, serrated like a knife. He wants to shut up, knows he's lashing out, but he can't seem to stop himself. "Did you know it was for me when you took it? Did you see it as a chance to finally get your foot in the door, finally get the career you really wanted?"

"What?" Callum asks, wounded like he's the one that's been stabbed, like Austin isn't the one that's bleeding out all over his living room.

"What's your *game* here?" Austin asks. "What do you *want* from me?"

Callum takes a step forward, but when Austin recoils back his face goes stone cold. "What exactly are you trying to imply?" he asks, no intonation whatsoever.

"I think you're a better actor than you'd like to admit," Austin accuses. It's the nasty, curling voice in the back of his head that comes out. It hooked dark tendrils into him, latching onto every hopeful thought he's had and dulling it with doubt. His head feels like an oil slick, tar-black and greasy, staining everything he comes into contact with.

"You're one to talk," Callum scoffs, too-quick, nostrils flaring as he loses his composure. "You sure have a type, don't you?" Callum asks, wincing as soon as the words come out of his mouth, like he hadn't meant to say it at all. Austin hates that getting him to react feels like a win, like pushing Callum into losing his careful control is anything to celebrate.

Austin's smile feels like a grimace, and he wrings his hands together, stretching and flexing his shaking fingers. His whole body is taut, a bowstring pulled to its maximum tensile strength, a breath away from snapping. "You really had me going earlier, I can't lie. I really was stupid enough to believe it," he says, voice breaking. "I wanted to believe it," he adds, barely more than a whisper.

"What does that even *mean*? What the fuck, Austin? You're not making any sense," Callum says, face twisting. He's the perfect picture of pained, and Austin is *livid* —he can't handle this anymore. He can't handle the way everyone around him always assumes that they know what he wants, that they know him better than he knows himself. He

needs Callum to stop tiptoeing around him, to stop being so fucking perfect all the time. “It’s been a long night. Can we sit, calm down a little and start over?”

“No, fuck this,” Austin mutters. He stalks out of the living room and into the foyer, grabbing his keys and pulling a hoodie haphazardly over his shoulders as he shoves his feet into a pair of sneakers. He needs to clear his head, and he can’t do that here. “I’m leaving,” he shouts. “*Don’t* follow me.”

It’s all he can do to not slam the door on his way out.

Besties Austin Butler and Ashley Tisdale Spotted on a Late Night In-n-Out Run

It’s true what they say: BFF really does mean best friends forever! Longtime friends Austin Butler and Ashley Tisdale were seen sating some late night cravings at an In-n-Out in LA this weekend after the actor attended a star-studded premiere for his new show, *Masters of the Air*. Austin made waves by walking the red carpet with the man that he’s rumored to be dating on his arm, and although the actor has yet to confirm any of the speculation, we certainly think pictures of the pair speak a thousand words. We’re only bummed that we didn’t get an invitation to what must have been a killer after the afterparty sleepover, because midnight munchies are our favorite!

[IMAGE DESCRIPTION: A man dressed in sweatpants with a hat pulled low over his face holds the door of an In-n-Out restaurant open for a woman with long wavy hair, wearing a matching athleisure set.]

Comments (74)

austinsboyfriendsmustache [banging pots and pans] BUT WHERE’S CALLUM

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

WHEW, IT'S DONE. this was an absolute whirlwind, and it would not have been possible without the incredible encouragement and support of the whole austin butler rpf cult. extending my deepest gratitude to them, and everyone who has left a comment or simply been reading along the way <3

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Austin is almost all of the way to Ashley's house when he realizes he should probably give her a call as a heads up. He's gripping the steering wheel so tight his fingers feel stiff when he lets go to dig his phone out of the pocket, thumbing open his favorites page with a shaking hand. Austin is rarely the one to call first and never does without texting to check-in beforehand, so in spite of the hour, Ashley picks up after only the second ring.

"What happened?" she asks immediately. "Tell me you're okay."

"Can I come over?" Austin asks, the words scratching their way out of his already torn-up throat, voice rough and raw. "I'm five minutes away."

"You know you never have to ask," Ashley says. Austin can feel her concern emanating out of the speaker, and he bites down hard on his lip, taking in an unsteady breath through his nose as he fights the heavy prickle of tears behind his eyes. "I'll meet you at the door, okay? Everyone is asleep, so don't worry about anyone else."

"Okay," Austin says, swallowing thickly. "I'll be there soon."

"Drive safe," Ashley orders, and Austin hangs up in lieu of a reply.

He could make the drive to Ashley's with his eyes closed at this point in his life, and he winds down the familiar roads on autopilot. It's late enough that there's hardly anyone else out in this part of town, leaving Austin alone in stifling silence, darkness drowned out by the perfectly spaced-out street lights that illuminate the asphalt a sickly washed-out grey.

Austin hates how cold lights are now; he hates how bright they are, and the way they make the night feel different than it used to. He misses when everything glowed warm, soft golds and yellows that were open and inviting and made even the deepest part of night feel like greeting an old friend. Austin has always been a night owl, always felt the most himself in the amorphous space between too-late and too-early, but right now the darkness feels foreign, and he feels like a stranger in a place he's never been.

Nothing feels like it should right now. His skin is too tight, like it's caging him in and keeping him captive somewhere he doesn't fit. He's too-aware of the waistband of his suit pants, fabric suddenly stiff and uncomfortable, holding him back from letting his body expand when he tries to take in a full inhale.

He should have grabbed a change of clothes before he left.

He probably shouldn't have left at all.

Austin pulls his car into park outside Ashley's house and kills the engine, but he doesn't get out. His hands are heavy in his lap, and he clenches his keys in his fist, zeroing in on the way the metal bites into his palm as he tries to even out his breathing. He wiggles his toes in his shoes and rolls his shoulders, flexing every muscle he can until he's stiff as a board before letting them go one by one, making his way back into his body as best he can before he finally takes a step out of the car.

Ashley takes one look at him as soon as she opens the door and pulls him into a hug, wrapping her arms around Austin's waist and holding him snug. Austin shudders, folding over himself to bury his face into the crown of her head. He squeezes his eyes shut, and the unshed tears he'd been holding back leak out, sticking to his eyelashes in wet clumps.

"It's going to be okay," Ashley says, low and soothing, spoken with the confidence of someone who doesn't know what Austin did.

Ashley shoos him into the bathroom after Austin unfurls back upright, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. She disappears down the hall into her bedroom, returning with a folded t-shirt and a pair of Chris' sweats as Austin splashes cold water on his face.

"Here," she offers, leaving the stack of clothes on the empty counter next to him. "Have you eaten anything?"

As if on cue, Austin's stomach growls. "Not really," he says. The only thing he's had since lunch were the few bite-sized canapés that had circulated at the afterparty.

"Alright, then you have two options," Ashley tells him. "We could stay here and I could make you something, or we could go for a drive and pick something up."

Austin thinks of Ashley's family, her husband and two small kids asleep in their beds, and the part of him that still wants to scream himself hoarse. He doesn't want to bother anyone more than he already is, so he doesn't want Ashley banging around in the kitchen in the middle of the night if she doesn't have to.

He sheds his top layers, slipping the borrowed t-shirt on before threading his arms back into his hoodie and zipping it all the way up to his throat. He changes pants next, breathing a sigh of relief as soon as he undoes the button and releases the pressure on his waist. Chris' sweats sit loose on his hips, but it's such a significant improvement that Austin doesn't even fuss with tightening the drawstring. He turns to Ashley, hiding his hands in his hoodie pockets and hunching his shoulders. "Let's go for a drive."

They quietly slip into the entryway, but Ashley makes a noise of disapproval when Austin pulls his keys back out of his pocket.

"Nope, nuh-uh," Ashley says, hands expectantly resting on her hips. "I'm driving, and you're not arguing about it."

Austin does as he's told, following Ashley back outside and sliding into the passenger seat without complaint. She doesn't ask him anything, just busies herself with navigating out of the neighborhood as Austin tries to figure out where exactly he's supposed to start explaining everything that led him to riding shotgun in her car in the middle of the night.

He settles on saying, "I did something stupid."

"I'm withholding judgment until more supporting details are provided."

Austin smiles, and it feels crooked and stiff on his face. His fingers itch for a cigarette for the first time in months; he'd kicked the habit for good over a year ago, but the craving is sharp enough that his jaw cramps from clenching his teeth trying to fight it.

“I told Callum I thought he only took the job for me so he could use me to get his foot in the door,” Austin says, fidgeting in his seat. He picks at his nails, eyes glued to his cuticles “Did I tell you he wanted to be an actor? And I didn’t fucking mean any of it, and I knew it even as I was saying it, but I couldn’t stop the words from coming out. It was like I was outside my body, watching myself burn everything down in slow motion.”

Ashley flips her turn signal, and the monotone clicking fills the cabin as she turns onto the main road, changing lanes and heading towards the freeway. “So what set all of this off?”

Austin brings a hand to his mouth, biting off the flap of skin next to his thumb nail that he’d torn loose.

“Stop that,” Ashley admonishes, reaching over and smacking his hand out of his mouth without even taking her eyes off the road. “Answer the question.”

“I ran into Josh at the afterparty,” Austin sighs.

“Okay,” Ashley says. “You knew that was probably going to happen.”

“Callum was there,” Austin explains, “and I don’t think I had really prepared myself for that part.”

“Was he a dick about it?” Ashley asks, and Austin doesn’t really know how to answer that fairly.

He doesn’t know how to be objective about any of this. That’s the problem. Josh had been dismissive and snide, but Austin thought it wasn’t unjustified. Callum put his machismo on display, marking his perceived territory, and the only part about it that really bothered Austin was how performative it was, which almost bothered him more.

The only person he has to blame for anything is himself.

“I just,” Austin searches for an explanation, at a loss for how to put it into words. It feels stuck behind his teeth and wedged in tight, like he needs a crowbar to prise it out of his mouth. “It’s nothing new, right? I felt guilty about Josh, and I felt like a hypocrite, standing there with Callum. I hated that there were so many other people around, and I got worked up and I spiraled, and I lashed out.”

“You were right, that all does sound really stupid,” Ashley concedes.

“Agree to disagree on the part of it that’s stupid, though.”

Austin frowns. “What does that mean?”

“Austin,” Ashley says in that way that she does when she’s trying very hard not to immediately call him out on his bullshit, like she does when she’s carefully trying to touch on something important. “You know I love you, right?”

“Just say what you want to say,” Austin tells her, too worn out to talk in veiled niceties.

Ashley throws him an unimpressed look before turning her attention back to the road. She merges onto the exit ramp, slowing down for the upcoming red light. “It’s just that you can’t see the forest for the trees, sometimes,” she says. “Humor me, alright? Take everything else away about Callum, for instance—your job, his job, all the extenuating circumstances. Pretend none of it matters. What do you want?”

Austin sits up from where he’d been slouched in his seat, back going ramrod straight. “That’s the *point*, though,” he insists. A flood of frustration flows through him, bristling underneath the surface of his skin. “I’d want the same thing I want now. I’d want him.”

“And you think the problem is that you can’t have him now, right?” Ashley asks, honest curiosity in her voice.

“Obviously I can’t,” Austin says, clipped. “None of it’s *real*, Ash, and even if there was some small chance in hell that he wanted half of what I want, it’s too late now.”

Ashley sighs, turning into an In-n-Out parking lot and rolling the car to a stop. “I know I’m asking the impossible here, but can you also pretend you’re not you for a second here? Take yourself out if it entirely.”

“And do what?” Austin asks, crossing and uncrossing his legs, searching for a comfortable position. “You’re acting like you know something I don’t know, and if you do, you should just stop dancing around it.”

“Think about it if you were him,” Ashley argues. “Think about it like he’s a character if you need to, Austin, but stop blinding yourself with what you *think* you know so much that you box yourself into a corner before you’ve even taken the chance to learn whether it’s true or not.”

Austin blinks, her words stinging him into silence. He doesn't lack self-awareness—that's probably his real problem, half the time. He knows he can retreat inside himself, get locked away inside his head at the detriment to what's going on around him. He could probably stand to be a little *less* self-aware, if anything.

He wishes he wasn't always full of doubt. He wishes he could trust himself and trust his own feelings without second-guessing everything all the time.

"I just wish I could do all of this over different, you know?" Austin laments, voice small, barely audible. "I wish I *could* take everything away. I wish I could have met him at the park, or at the fucking grocery store, or literally any way else than how I did."

"But you can't, and you didn't," Ashley tells him, matter of fact. "That doesn't mean you can't still get what you want."

"But he—"

"Austin, there is absolutely no way that man is getting paid enough to put himself through everything he's put himself through *for you*," Ashley interrupts, turning in her seat to stare at him face-on. "I don't really know him, but if I had to guess, I would comfortably put money down on him not going to the lengths he has because he thinks he has to. He's definitely not keeping up the charade because of his job, because none of this is even remotely in the same universe as his job description. He's only doing it for you."

Austin's face twists, but in the back of his mind, an alarmingly similar conversation he'd had with Callum starts to resurface. "I just don't understand why he would do that," Austin says, even as Callum's voice from months ago echoes out inside his head.

There are a lot of things I don't have to do, he'd said. *I do them anyway, because I want to.*

It hits him like a ton of bricks, slamming into him like a car crashing into a concrete barrier at top speed. It knocks the breath out of him, leaves him feeling bruised and broken.

Callum had tried to tell him, but Austin hadn't listened.

"Fuck," Austin swears, slumping down like he's been deflated. He covers his face with his hands, fingers pressing into his closed eyes until he sees stars behind his eyelids. "*Fuck*, Ash. What am I going to

do?”

Ashley reaches over to pat Austin’s knee, giving him a quick squeeze. “You’re going to come inside with me, and we’re going to order a truly ill-advised amount of greasy food that we will eat in the car while blasting some spectacularly shitty music,” she says. “Then we’re going home, where you’re going to sleep for at least eight hours, and *then* you can start figuring out a way to fix this.”

Austin slowly drags his hands down his face, looking over to meet Ashley’s reassuring gaze. “You really think I can?” he asks. “Fix it.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself,” Ashley says with a smile. “If anyone can, it’s you.”

There are dozens of missed calls glaring at Austin from his phone screen the next morning, and more than double that in unread messages.

Austin hovers over the messages app, but he can’t bring himself to open it up, not yet prepared for what he might find. His call log tells him that Callum had only tried to call him once last night. James, on the other hand, had much less discretion.

James picks up before the first ring even finishes when Austin works up the nerve to call him back. “Oh, good, you’re alive,” he says, voice unexpectedly and uncharacteristically cheerful. “So glad to hear I don’t actually have to file a missing persons report! Do you know how much extra paperwork that would have been for me on top of dealing with the fallout of literally losing a star client, all because he decided to up and *run the fuck away* while under an active security threat?”

Austin winces. “Look,” he tries to placate, but James cuts him off.

“No, *you* look,” James interjects, angrier than Austin thinks he’s ever heard him. “This isn’t a joke, Austin. You can’t just disappear like that—ideally not ever for my blood pressure, thank you, but especially right now,” he says. His tone is so severe that Austin shrinks in on himself, even without being subject to the withering glare that he knows ought to match it. “You get that this isn’t me threatening to drown you in your pool to get you to answer your phone for work,

right? This is me asking for the bare minimum assurance that you're not dead in a ditch somewhere."

"I'm sorry," Austin says. His mouth is dry, and the apology comes out brittle. He hadn't—he'd been so caught up in himself and his hurt that he honestly neglected to consider the implications.

"You should be," James says, succinct. "You owe me, is all I'm saying. I'm billing you for so much overtime," he adds. "Now are you going to tell me why your boyfriend called me completely freaking out in the middle of the night, or what?"

"He's not my boyfriend," Austin denies before he can stop himself. The title sits ill-fitting in his chest, like his heart was forcibly removed and smashed in the dirt before being reinserted upside down and backwards.

"So what, you broke up?" James asks. "You just had a fight and then dramatically flounced off and made it my problem?"

Austin doesn't love how close to the truth that assessment is. "We weren't ever together."

There's a long pause, and then James sounds genuinely confused when he asks, "What?"

"What, what?" Austin repeats. "You're the one who said to pretend to be together during that first meeting."

The silence stretches on again, long and drawn out before James swears. "Fucking Christ, Austin," he says. "I was *kidding*."

Austin blinks, uncomprehending. When he processes what James means, outrage spews out of him like a boiled-over pot. "You can't just joke about something like that!" he shouts.

"I didn't fathom any universe where you'd take it seriously!" James rebuts, incredulous before he lets out a beleaguered sigh. "I mean, I *clearly* should have known better. Jesus, Austin."

"So I'm going to need a new bodyguard, I guess," Austin says, stilted and awkward as he redirects the conversation. "And I guess, uh. Someone should probably let him know?"

Callum is probably still at Austin's house. Probably still waiting for Austin to come back. Austin hates it, feels like the worst person in the

entire fucking world, but he needs some time and space from everything to figure out how to move forward or he knows he's just going to keep making everything worse without meaning to.

"Are you sure about this?" James asks, careful, like he's tiptoeing through a minefield.

Austin is sure of pretty much only one thing. "I need to get my shit together, okay?" he says. "I'm—not doing great, and I can't keep taking it out on other people."

"And you think forcing him to leave is the best way to do that?" James asks. "Have you ever even asked him what *he* wants?"

"I need to deal with some stuff, and I can't think right with him there," Austin admits, ignoring the second part of James' question. "Tell him it's not him, okay? Tell him that I'll call him. I just need some time."

Austin can only hope that Callum will pick up the phone whenever he does.

After he wraps up the call with James, Austin tabs back over to his messages and finds Callum's contact, his second most recent thread. The preview, time stamped an hour after Austin had initially left, stabs him like a knife clean-through his chest, driving home how badly he'd fucked up.

can you please just tell me you're safe?

Austin bites down on the inside of his lip so hard he tastes blood, copper bursting on his tongue and coating the inside of his mouth. He thumbs out a reply with clumsy fingers, and he knows it's the absolute least that Callum deserves, the bottom of the barrel bare minimum, but it's all he can do. He wants to turn his phone off as soon as he hits send, but he doesn't, leaving it turned on and plugged in on the bedside table in concession, a penance for all of his oversights.

I'm sorry.

When Austin finally goes home, it's like Callum had never been there

at all.

Everything is spotless, pristine. Even the dress shoes that Austin had haphazardly kicked off by the door have been neatly placed on his shoe rack. A cloud of shame descends over him when he thinks about Callum stress-cleaning into the early hours of the morning, waiting for a reply that was never going to come, but the alternative feels worse.

He doesn't want to think about Callum trying to systematically erase his presence from Austin's life after being told he was being reassigned. He can't stand the idea that Callum might have felt like he wasn't wanted, that he wasn't enough for Austin, and it's yet another realization that comes too-little, too-late.

Austin understands what everyone's always trying to tell him about himself, now

It would be so easy to give in and give Callum a call. He wants to throw himself down on his knees at Callum's feet and beg him to come back, but Austin can't do it. He can't be the one that's playing hot and cold, yanking Callum back and forth because he doesn't know how to have what he wants.

The new bodyguard the agency sends over is... fine. He's older, stern-faced and quiet, and he stays out of Austin's way. He only ever asks pertinent questions, never making any kind of small-talk. Austin forgets he's there most of the time, and it makes all of the ways he'd interacted with Callum stand out in stark contrast by comparison.

The contrast was never more apparent than after the first day, when the new bodyguard had left at the end of his shift with a short *see you tomorrow*, and Austin had the startling and sudden epiphany that Callum probably hadn't needed to live with Austin at all.

Low key, James had said. *A precaution.*

Callum had told him on the very first day that it was mainly day-to-day protection. That Austin didn't need to change anything about his behavior. He told Austin to forget he was here, to treat him like he's treating the new bodyguard, but Austin hadn't. He feels like his entire understanding of the past few months is rearranging right before his very eyes, but it's less like it's turning into something new and more like Austin is finally seeing everything for what it really was.

God, he'd been so dumb. Austin has no idea how he didn't see it. He has no idea how he ever thought that what they were to each other

was normal, was easily written off by the roles they'd found themselves in, and Austin feels worse with each day that passes without Callum.

He'd taken for granted the routines that they had, how seamlessly he fit into Austin's life. He hadn't noticed how much that Callum felt like he belonged by Austin's side until Austin didn't have him anymore.

There are so many things that Austin hadn't realized he'd gotten used to until they were gone. The house feels too quiet, now, no mindless chatter or the sounds of someone else living their life creating soft background noise when Austin reads or writes. There's no one to take the second mug that Austin pulls out of the cupboard every morning by habit, no one there to do the dishes whenever Austin would forget, no one around to remind him to stretch his legs and drink some water when he gets locked into something and spends half a day hunched over in the same position.

There's no one smiling at Austin anymore. There's no one here to make him laugh, make him feel warm and content with endlessly fond glances and continuous affectionate touches. He doesn't have anyone to cuddle up to on the couch at the end of the day, anyone to run their fingers through Austin's hair. There's no one for Austin to lean on, to hold his weight when Austin can't anymore.

Austin's house feels emptier than it ever has, because there's no one in it making him feel loved.

Callum made his house feel like a *home*.

Austin turns his phone over in his hands, getting closer to finally reaching out and making the call. He thinks he knows what he needs, now, but he needs to make sure that he goes about it the right way.

He's been so selfish with his feelings, only worrying about what Callum wants in the context of himself. Austin wants Callum, but he wants to be what's best for Callum most of all, so he needs to be the most optimal version of himself he can be before he drags Callum back into dealing with the mess that is his mind.

Soon, though. He thinks he's going to be ready soon.

Until then, Austin goes through the motions. He trains, he cooks, he cleans. He drops a sock down in the gap between the washing machine and the dryer one day, and when he reaches down to grab it, his hand curls into something else, thick fabric squishing under his

fingers.

He freezes when pulls it out and finds himself staring at a sweater. His heart stops beating in his chest at the sight of it; a black knit quarter-zip with an oversized collar, well-worn and softened with age.

It's Callum's.

Austin holds it up to his face and inhales, and he's immediately struck with the spicy scent that he doesn't think he'll ever be able to forget. It must have never gotten washed, falling down unnoticed whenever Callum was doing laundry.

He pulls it on over his head, zipping it all the way up until the collar closes around the bottom of his face like a cocoon, and wears it for the rest of the day.

And the next.

And the next.

Austin goes through the motions. He reads, he writes, he promptly responds to every message James sends. He keeps a regimented schedule. He takes Milo out three times a day, two short outs and one long walk. He calls Ashley, even if he asks her more questions than he answers. He sits with himself, reflecting, leaning into it even when he gets uncomfortable.

He puts the work in, and then he turns around and does press, putting on a show. He smiles through interviews with Callum's sweater wrapped around his shoulders. He curls into it whenever he's at home.

Austin draws, and tries to paint, but every shade of blue turns into a highlight or a shadow of Callum's eyes, and every brushstroke morphs into a different curve of Callum's body. He plays guitar and hears Callum in every chord, fingers plucking at strings that only seem to be able to recreate the tone of Callum's voice and the timbre of his laugh.

Callum is everywhere Austin turns, in everything he sees and does. He overwhelms Austin's senses, an undeniable presence that looms in spite of his absence, and if Austin's been waiting for a sign he's not sure he's going to get one any clearer than this.

He thought he was supposed to untangle all of his knots alone, to not put that burden on anyone else's shoulders, but now he's starting to think that maybe he was wrong about that, too.

Austin goes through the motions. He trains, he cooks, he cleans. He reads, he writes, he draws. He goes to work, he comes home.

He starts to make a plan.

He's going to call Callum, and he's going to ask if he can talk. If he can explain. He's going to apologize. He'll ask if Callum can meet him somewhere, if Austin can explain everything in person, but if Callum doesn't want to do that then Austin can still do it all over the phone.

He wants to ask for Callum's help, because he doesn't want to do any of this alone anymore.

Austin runs it through in his mind as he makes dinner; reheated leftovers from the night before. He'd been gone all day, a jam-packed schedule full of screen tests and costume fittings and having his whole face and torso molded for prosthetics as pre-production inches towards in-production, and he's too tired to do anything other than throw a container in the microwave.

Milo, who'd been dealt the indignity of spending a whole day with the dog sitter, bumps his head at Austin's heels as he practices scripts in his head: if Callum says this, Austin will say that. If Callum says that, Austin will say this. He eats standing up, leaning over the kitchen counter and bracing his weight on his elbows, scenario after scenario scrolling through his head like ticker tape. He chews and swallows, but he doesn't even really register the taste. He puts the dirty dishes in the sink to deal with tomorrow.

Tomorrow, he's going to call Callum.

Austin sleepwalks his way through his bedtime routine, frowning in confusion when he can't find his hairbrush. He hasn't been sleeping well, and he'd only been half-awake when he'd left this morning, but he swore that he left it on the counter instead of putting it back up where it belongs. He remembers thinking about it as he drove to the studio, but it's not on the counter and it's not in the cabinet, either.

He runs his hand through his hair, finger-combing it out. He's been misplacing stuff more often than usual these days, distracted by everything that's been going on. He still hasn't been able to find his favorite shirt that he lost months ago—he looked everywhere for it, practically reorganized his whole closet, and he has no idea where else he might have left it.

It feels like he's approaching the light at the end of the tunnel, though.

He thinks he's about to enter some clear air after spending so long wading through dense fog, and things will be better on the other side. They have to be.

Austin flips off the light in the bathroom and makes his way into his bedroom in the dark, fingertips gliding on the wall so he doesn't cut the corner too soon. His feet drag on the rug, and he faceplants down onto the bed as soon as his knees find the edge of the mattress, but he's caught off guard by a crinkling sound when his head hits the pillow.

Something sticks to his face when he sits up, and Austin frowns when he slaps a hand out, fumbling in the dark to find the switch on the bedside lamp. He squints against the light that fills the room, reaching up to peel a piece of paper off of his cheek that's held in place on his skin by his moisturizer.

It's a folded piece of ruled paper, torn out of a notebook that Austin doesn't recognize. The sound of blood rushing in his head slowly starts to fill his ears until it's all that he can hear, and as he slowly unfolds it, Austin is struck by a deep and foreboding sense of dread. Everything feels—wrong.

Opening the paper reveals a handwritten note, and ice fills Austin's veins as he scans the words carefully penned out in red ink.

I knew he didn't love you like I love you.

It's punctuated with a heart.

Austin springs up out of bed and drops the note like he's been burned, stumbling out of the room and scrambling to remember where he'd left his phone. He finds it next to the microwave in the kitchen, phone case blending in with the countertop, and his heart pounds in his chest as he unlocks the screen and calls out for Milo with a strained voice.

He scoops Milo up under his arm as soon as he trots into Austin's line of sight, pressing his phone so hard into his ear that he can hear his pulse throbbing against the screen. "C'mon, pick up," Austin mutters to himself as he runs outside, concrete rough on his bare feet. "I don't — *fuck*," he swears.

It's not even late; only half past nine, twilight recently fading into proper night. Austin makes a break for the sidewalk and keeps walking at a fast clip, no destination in mind except to get to somewhere visible, to get *away*.

Callum told him to run if he ever found himself in a situation where something didn't feel right, and it's the first time that Austin's natural instinct is the correct thing to do.

The call finally connects, and Austin rushes to speak. "I need you to come get me," he says. "Right now."

"Where are you?" Ashley asks, all business in response to Austin's transparently perturbed tone.

"Uh," Austin says. "Can you meet me at the café by my house? I have Milo. I need to call James, and probably the police—"

"The *police*?" Ashley interrupts, voice pitching high enough that Milo's ears twitch against Austin's chest.

"Probably the non-emergency line? Like, I don't think I'm in an immediate emergency, but someone broke into my house and left a really fucking creepy note, and I don't even have—"

"Oh my god, Austin, shut up," Ashley yells. "I'm on my way. Call James and he'll take care of the rest of it, okay?"

Austin hardly processes the rest of the walk to the café. He doesn't remember anything he says to James, mind hollowing out into an empty void as he robotically explains everything that happened once he got home. He doesn't have to wait for more than five minutes before a familiar car pulls up next to where he's loitering on the sidewalk, and Austin feels like he can breathe for the first time since he fell into bed when he collapses into Ashley's front seat.

He feels like he's been run over, steamrolled and flattened into nothing. The soles of his feet sting, scraped raw from pounding into the pavement with no shoes for a mile and a half. He's not sure if Ashley asks him anything, and if she does, he doesn't know if he responds. His head is shuttered, vision narrowing like he has blinders on, and they're caving in on his field of view until he can't see anything at all.

At some point they must get back to Ashley's, because the next thing Austin knows he's tucked in on himself on the corner of her overstuffed couch, hands mechanically raking through Milo's fur. The lights are dim, and no one else is around, and the lost time should bother Austin more than it does at the moment, but all he feels is numb.

His ears perk up when he hears Emerson fussing from the nursery. Austin slowly unfolds himself from the pretzel his body has twisted itself into, limbs stiff as he pads quietly into her room. She's awake in her crib, tiny arms flapping as her face contorts up in the precursor of a wailing cry.

Austin hushes her, carefully lifting her up and cradling her against his chest. He bounces in place, whispering nonsense in a low tone to try and calm her down. There's a rocker in the corner of the room and Austin sits down in it, foot pushing against the floor, swaying them into a steady soothing rhythm.

It's late enough when Emerson settles back to sleep that it's officially tomorrow when Austin checks the time, and suddenly the only thing that Austin wants is to hear Callum's voice. He should wait until the morning, but Austin is so fucking tired of waiting. He's done it long enough.

It takes him a minute to fish his phone out of his pocket without bothering Emerson. If he weren't so exhausted, if he hadn't already had his insides completely excavated into vacancy, his heart would be racing as he listens to the repetitive ringing pattern, waiting for Callum to complete the connection. It rings once, twice, three times, and it would only make sense that Callum's asleep, but Austin still feels something leaden sink in his stomach as the call goes unanswered.

After the fourth ring, Callum picks up.

"Austin?" Callum says, voice sleep-drenched and uncertain, like he's not quite sure he believed the name that came up on his screen. The sound of it makes Austin's eyes go blurry, brimming heavy with tears. It's like a switch has been being flipped, and they roll in hot rivulets down his cheeks against his will, a dam breaking open, his body is finally working through everything that he's been repressing for the last few hours, weeks, months—fucking *years*' worth of pent-up emotion compounding and spilling uncontrollably down his face.

He sniffs, and it resonates loudly in his ears, echoing around the nursery.

Callum makes a noise like he's been punched, like all the air's been forced out of his lungs in one fell swoop. "Austin?" he repeats, sounding significantly more awake than the first time he called Austin's name. "Baby, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry if I woke you up," Austin says, words thick and slurring as he talks under his breath, doing his best not to wake Emerson back up. The syllables are glued together by the moisture lining his throat, viscous and suffocating, and Austin tries to swallow it down. "Can you —" Austin asks, and he means to follow it with *talk*, but his throat clicks and he can't finish the sentence. When he tries again what ends up coming out is, "Can you come over?"

A tight, anguished sound fills the line, cut short like Callum turned his mouth away from the receiver. "Where—where are you?" he asks. "Why are you whispering?"

Austin smiles wetly to himself, appreciating that Callum didn't ask the obvious question, because it's more than clear that Austin's not okay. "I'm at Ashley's," he says, "and I don't want to wake the baby."

"Baby?" Callum asks, confused. Austin likes the way he said it before better, when he wasn't talking about Emerson. "What time is it there? Why aren't you at home?"

So many questions, and Austin's head throbs, an intense pulse at the base of his skull that radiates around to his temples in an aching halo. Callum still hasn't answered Austin's question, the one that he's on tenterhooks waiting to hear the response to, but he answered the phone and that has to mean something.

"What do you mean what time is it?" Austin asks, because if Callum gets to play twenty questions then Austin does, too. "Where are you?" he adds, and then the words just keep spilling out in an endless, rambling stream, one sentence after another that he can't stop. "I'm not at home because—something about a crime scene? I think? I don't know, but Ashley came to get me and then I called James and Ashley took me home while James took care of the rest it, and then nobody told me anything else, but I don't even remember much of anything about the past few hours right now so I can't even be sure, and I'm so fucking tired but I can't sleep and I miss you so much." Austin's voice breaks at the end, and he squeezes his eyes shut, another set of fat tears streaking down his face.

"I'm in London," Callum says, distracted. The sound of his breath puffs in Austin's ear, and there's a bunch of muffled rustling noises, indistinct but indicative of Callum moving around. "I'll be there in—sixteen hours? Give or take."

"Oh," Austin says, voice small. He never even considered that Callum

wouldn't be here. "I didn't—you don't—"

"Don't even bother finishing that sentence," Callum interrupts. "I already booked the flight."

Austin chews on the inside of his cheek until it feels raw. "Okay."

"Austin?" Callum asks, and Austin makes a noise of acknowledgement, unable to form any more words. "I missed you, too," he says, devastatingly soft and sincere. "I'll see you soon."

Austin closes his eyes and lets out a shaky breath, thinking soon can't come soon enough.

Austin sleeps in fits and starts after hanging up with Callum and putting Emerson back in her crib, barely able to string more than an hour together at a time when the sun starts creeping in through the windowpanes and he gives up trying.

He's sitting in the breakfast nook, a second pot of fresh coffee keeping warm on the counter when Ashley wanders in. She looks entirely unsurprised to see Austin awake, and she wordlessly pours herself a cup before settling into the chair next to him.

"I'm not even going to ask how much you slept," Ashley says, blowing over the rim of her mug.

Austin watches the steam dance in swirling patterns up into the air. "Probably for the best."

Ashley takes a long sip and fixes Austin with an appraising stare. "I will ask how you're doing, though," she says, "and you have to be at least seventy-five percent honest with me."

"I called Callum," Austin says outright, deciding to cut to the chase.

"You did?" Ashley asks, eyebrows rising high on her forehead. "How did that go?"

Austin shrugs. "He's coming over."

"Wait, when?" Ashley asks, twisting to assess the state of the kitchen,

like the pile of mail that's stacked on the dining table and the row of sippy cups drying on the counter make it not fit for company. "Now?"

"Uh," Austin says, looking down at his watch. "In about nine hours, give or take."

Ashley snaps back to him, face full of skepticism. "Nine *hours*?"

Austin shifts his weight in his chair, scratching at the back of his neck. "He was in England when I called."

"England," Ashley repeats, expression going carefully blank.

"Are you just going to keep repeating things I say?" Austin complains.

"I just want to make sure I have this right," Ashley says. "You called him in the middle of the night, and despite being on the literal opposite side of the planet and not hearing anything from you for weeks, he immediately decides to fly back because—you told him what happened, right?"

"Kind of?" Austin says. "I think so, anyway. It's all still kind of a blur. But I didn't know he wasn't in the country when I asked him to come over."

Ashley's eyes get impossibly wider. "So he dropped everything and came running back to you the second you asked, just because you wanted him to. Got it."

"That's not—" Austin starts to say, but then he stops himself. "No, yeah, that's basically it."

Ashley radiates smugness without even needing to say anything else, and Austin rolls his eyes, pushing himself up from the table and busying himself with making breakfast for her and Chris and the kids instead of subjecting himself to listening to anything that sounds like *I told you so*.

The rest of the day passes by agonizingly slowly until Callum texts him when they're finishing up with dinner.

Austin's carrying a pile of empty plates to the sink when his phone buzzes in his pocket. He doesn't normally keep it on him, but he's had it within reach ever since last night, anxiously waiting for any kind of update in any direction.

James still hasn't given him one, which Austin's gotten used to at this point. He doesn't know if they're keeping him in the dark on purpose or if they genuinely don't have anything to share, but Austin has more important matters at hand.

"Okay, well!" Ashley says when Austin passes on the news that Callum will be here soon. "We're all going to go to the park, and then I think we'll go get some ice cream. We should be gone for at *least* two hours," she adds, eyeing Austin with a look of significance as they leave.

Austin tries not to wait by the door, but there's barely half a knock before he's tearing it open. He knows it has to be Callum, knows it shouldn't be anyone else, but Austin's breath still hitches in his chest when lays eyes on him.

Callum looks as much of a mess as Austin feels, dark circles hollowing out his eyes and patches of uneven, overgrown stubble shadowing his jaw. His hair is a disordered array of tangled curls, frizzy and misshapen like he'd been combing his fingers restlessly through them for the entirety of his eleven-hour flight.

Austin steps to the side to let Callum over the threshold, and as soon as the door is closed behind them Callum crushes him into a hug, holding Austin so tight he can't breathe. Austin doesn't even consider complaining; he would let Callum steal all of the air out of his lungs that he wanted if it meant that he never let go.

Callum trying to pull away is what causes Austin to make a wounded noise of protest, but he doesn't let go. He reaches up to frame Austin's face with both hands, bringing their foreheads firmly together.

"You scared me so fucking bad," Callum murmurs against Austin's mouth. "I tried to get here so fast my mum had to stop me when I was already half out the door to tell me my trousers were on inside out, and I still couldn't get here fast enough."

Austin kisses him so hard their teeth clack together, lips an afterthought, propelled forward solely by the desire to get as close to Callum as he possibly can. Austin would climb inside him if he could; he'd crack open Callum's chest and make a home for himself right in the center of Callum's rib cage, content to stay there forever, never needing to leave.

"I know we need to talk," Austin gasps, fingers clenching tight on Callum's collar, "but I *need* you."

Callum kisses him again, walking Austin back against the wall. “Whatever you need, baby,” he says, pressing the words into Austin’s lips like a promise. “I’ve got you. Whatever you need.”

Austin pushes back into Callum, hips rolling on his thigh. Callum slots his knee in between Austin’s legs and gives Austin something more solid to rub against, friction from the firm muscle a sharp contrast to the gentle way Callum nuzzles his nose into Austin’s before diving in for another kiss. Austin opens his mouth and lets Callum kiss him, thorough and deep, a needy whine building up in the back of his throat.

“Bedroom,” Austin insists. “Now.”

Callum chuckles against Austin’s mouth, the smile that Austin has missed so fucking much stretching wide and showing teeth. “Just show me where.”

Austin closes a hand around Callum’s wrist, dragging him down the hall and into the guest room. He locks the door behind them and then shoves Callum down onto the bed, swinging a leg over Callum’s lap to straddle him before bringing their mouths back together in another crushing kiss.

Callum wraps his arms around Austin and pulls him close, one hand splayed between his shoulder blades and the other planted in the small of his back. Austin licks into his mouth, no finesse, pure desperation.

He’s vibrating, body shaking with how badly he needs to devour Callum. He wants to consume him, eat him *alive*, take every last piece of Callum and fuse him with Austin so they can’t be separated ever again. He needs Callum to fill him up, to stuff him full, to fit his whole body inside Austin until he’s bursting at the seams.

“Easy,” Callum tells him, breaking the kiss to bump his nose against Austin’s. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Austin can’t say anything about how Callum *did*, because Austin was the one who left first. None of that matters anymore; not here and now, not when Austin finally has Callum back again. He leans down and latches his mouth onto Callum’s neck, pulling Callum’s skin between his teeth and sucking hard. He laves his tongue over the bite, lips smearing around it, spit smoothing the way.

It’s still not enough. Austin is running on a deficit, chasing after

everything that he's been missing, and he's only begun to scratch the surface. He needs more. Callum's nails scratch a cluster of parallel lines into the small of his back when Austin scrapes his teeth back over the mark, irritating the already reddened skin.

"You wanna put your name on me too, sweetheart?" Callum asks, amusement underpinning the breathless intonation. His accent thickens the words, voice deeper and rougher than when he's trying harder to articulate himself. "You can," he says. "I'm yours."

Austin groans, fingers digging deep wells into Callum's shoulders as his hips involuntarily buck forward. He reaches down and grabs at the hem of Callum's shirt, yanking it upwards. "Off," he demands, wrestling with the fabric as Callum lifts his arms so Austin can pull it overhead.

He throws the shirt to the side and pushes at Callum's chest until his torso is flat on the bed, leaning over to capture his mouth in another kiss. Callum cups the back of his head and Austin moans as their lips slide together, taking in his fill of the taste of Callum's tongue.

Austin mouths along Callum's jaw, leaving a wet trail of sloppy kisses over Callum's cheek. The rough edge of his stubble scratches Austin's face, rubbing him raw. He licks a line down the column of Callum's neck, feeling the way Callum's pulse jumps under his tongue, his heartbeat thrumming hummingbird-fast under Austin's hands.

Callum throws his head back, exposing more of his throat for Austin to access. It's a blank canvas waiting to be painted with Austin's teeth, plain and pale, begging for splashes of pink and purple.

Austin gropes at Callum's chest, kneading handfuls of his pecs before rolling a nipple between his fingertips. Callum gasps, hips jerking, and Austin grins against his neck as he circles the hard peak with his thumb, pinching firmly as he sinks his teeth back into Callum's skin.

There's too much of Callum that he wants to taste, but they don't have the time for Austin to be as thorough as he wants. Later, though, Austin's going to spend all day licking over every inch of him. Austin is going to take his time nipping at Callum's nape, then he'll trail his tongue down to Callum's fucking toes, marking him up with lips and tongue and teeth until there's not a single part of him that Austin hasn't discovered and laid claim to. Austin wants to kiss the backs of his knees and to suck at the soft vulnerable skin of Callum's inner thighs. He wants to lay wet lines over Callum's stomach with his

tongue, press his face deep enough into Callum's side that he can trace over every individual rib, and bite at Callum's shoulders long enough that he leaves a pool of spit in the well of his collarbones. Austin wants to make Callum writhe until his skin is shining with sweat, and then he's going to shove his face into Callum's armpit and lap up every last drop.

Austin plants a knee between Callum's spread legs and kisses his way down Callum's chest, pointing his tongue to swirl over Callum's nipple while his hand keeps working the other side. Callum rocks his hips up, erratic little thrusts like he's not even entirely aware he's doing it. Austin slowly grinds back into him, and the pressure has both of them gasping, Austin's breath coming in ragged bursts and leaving him panting open-mouthed against Callum's skin.

The hard line of Callum's dick pushing up into him is prominent even through all the layers of clothes that separate them. Austin moves the rest of the way down Callum's body and lets gravity drag him off the bed and to the floor, knees hitting the rug as his hands slide greedily up and down Callum's thick thighs.

Callum pushes himself up onto his elbows and looks down at Austin like he's a marvel, like Austin on his knees is the best thing he's ever seen, but Austin wants to show him something even better. He buries his face into the front of Callum's jeans, inhaling deep.

"Can I?" Austin asks, words coming out slurred as he rubs his face on Callum's zipper, the rough denim scraping over his already scratched up cheeks. "*Please.*"

"Yeah," Callum rasps out, thick and heady, "C'mon."

Austin's hands shake as he undoes Callum's fly and then tugs his jeans down around his thighs. There's a wet patch on his underwear, fabric damp and darkened right where Austin can see the perfect outline of the head of his cock, and he's too impatient to wait any longer. He closes his mouth around the tip, cotton sticking to his tongue as he sucks the taste of Callum out of it.

He moans when it hits his taste buds, sharp and salty and so fucking good, eyes fluttering shut as he savors the flavor.

Callum reaches down, brushing Austin's hair back from off his forehead and holding him steady. Austin looks up at him, and the way Callum is staring back at him—all unbridled heat, with his pupils blown wide and his bottom lip caught between his teeth, the *want* that

Austin has been longing for so blatantly illustrated on his face—makes another moan fall out of his mouth.

“Go on,” Callum tells him, encouraging. “It’s okay.”

Austin hooks his fingers under the waistband of Callum’s underwear and drags it down to meet his jeans. Spit pools in his mouth when Callum’s dick springs free, heavy and long and tantalizingly thick, just like the man it belongs to. Austin wraps a hand around it, mesmerized by the glide of his foreskin when he gives it an exploratory pump. The head peeks out ruddy and burnished red when he pulls it back, tip shining with precum.

He leans down and licks over it, taste bursting bright on his tongue without any barrier left between them. Austin closes his lips completely over the head and sucks Callum down until his mouth meets his fist, jaw opening wide to accommodate him. He needs all of it, needs to feel the stretch of his lips until the corners feel like they’re going to split, needs the ache in his jaw when he takes Callum down to the hilt, head pressing into Austin’s throat.

Callum holds himself still, but Austin can feel him tremble, core muscles fluttering under the hand he has flattened on Callum’s stomach when Austin bobs his head and laps at his slit before tonguing under his foreskin. Austin wants him to make him lose control, wants him bucking and swearing until he’s speechless, out of his mind with pleasure.

He wants to ruin Callum for anybody else.

Austin lets his jaw go slack when he takes Callum back down to the base of his fist, stroking his hand in time with the rhythm of his mouth until the entire length of him is slick with Austin’s spit. He carefully inhales through his nose and then takes his hand away entirely, clutching Callum’s thigh as he slowly swallows Callum all the way down. When Austin thinks he can’t take any more, when his throat constricts and his breath seizes in his chest, when tears start leaking out of the corners of his eyes from how deep Callum already is, Austin keeps going. He keeps going until his face is buried in the thatch of hair at the base of Callum’s dick, nose smashing firmly into Callum’s pubic bone.

“*Fuck*,” Callum swears, equal parts strained and awestruck. Austin shudders, reaching down to grind the heel of his hand against his own cock, aching hard and throbbing from where it’s still trapped inside

his joggers.

The movement makes him gag, eyes watering more as he chokes around Callum. He pulls back just enough to breathe, and he pulls a strangled groan out of Callum when he regains his composure enough to swallow around him, throat tightening on Callum's dick.

"Fucking incredible," Callum says. His voice is ragged, fingers carding reverently through Austin's hair. "So fucking good, so fucking good for *me*."

Austin moans, roughly rubbing himself over his pants. He lifts his other hand and places it over Callum's, curling Callum's fingers into his roots, coaxing him for more. Callum immediately takes the hint and tugs, pulling Austin's hair and guiding him back up to the top of his dick. Austin drowns in it, overwhelmed by sensation, Callum's broad hands in his hair and fat cock hot and heavy on his tongue.

Austin snakes his hand down the front of his pants, fisting his dick and squeezing it hard. He barely has room to move, but he jerks himself from base to tip, fingers smearing where he's wet at the head and barely alleviating the friction drag of dry skin.

Callum twitches when Austin sucks him back down, hips bucking up in short thrusts as his muscles spasm. Austin's already too far gone to ask, and he thinks Callum's probably too close to fuck his face properly, but a spark of electricity lights him up from inside out at the thought alone.

He hums, the vibration rattling his chest as he works his mouth over Callum. All he can hear is the smacking wet slide of his lips, the sound of suction filling his ears, drowning out the sound of his hand rustling in his underwear.

Austin fucks into his fist and his mouth gets even sloppier, tongue lolling heavy in his mouth. He relies on the movement of his head more than any kind of finesse, bobbing in time to the roll of his hips, a wanton moan ripping out of him when he thumbs over his slit.

"I'm—fuck, *Austin*," Callum gasps, hips stuttering as he tightens his fist in Austin's hair and tries to pull him off. "I'm gonna come."

Austin resists the pull, stubbornly sealing his lips tighter around Callum's dick. He dives down too fast, grunting when the tip triggers his gag flex, nothing but gargled noises falling out of him when Callum arches up off the bed.

Callum thrusts into Austin's mouth and spills down Austin's throat with a choked-off whine, gripping Austin's hair hard enough that he comes all over himself without ever getting his pants off. He pulls his hand free and wipes it off on his thigh but doesn't move, holding Callum in his mouth, gently sucking until Callum's twitching underneath him.

"Jesus Christ," Callum pants, chest heaving as he drags Austin up off his dick. "Come here," he says, hands scrambling on Austin's shoulders as he tries to hoist him back onto the bed. "Let me—"

Austin huffs out a laugh as he crawls back into Callum's lap. "Don't worry about it."

"What?" Callum asks, brows furrowing in confusion before his eyes drop to the growing wet spot seeping through the front of Austin's joggers. His jaw slackens, mouth falling open, and Austin's face flushes, warm and satisfied. "Did you—oh my god," Callum croaks. He hooks a hand behind Austin's neck and drags him down into a kiss, lips slotting perfectly into Austin's, two puzzle pieces that were made to fit together.

Austin brings both of his hands up to hold Callum's face, thumbs pressing into the patch of bare skin beside Callum's chin that never wants to grow any hair. His fingers hook under the corner of Callum's jaw, and he scratches through the overgrown stubble he finds there, the undeniable evidence of the way Callum dropped everything and trekked halfway around the world to get to Austin when Austin needed him.

Austin pours everything he doesn't know how to verbalize into the kiss. He imparts every ounce of regret for the way he handled things into his lips, kissing every apology he knows that he owes deep inside Callum's mouth. He licks every last iota of adoration that he possesses across Callum's hard palate, and drips as much tenderness as he can off the tip of his tongue.

There's no way it comes anywhere close to conveying the full scope of feelings that Austin has for Callum, but it's certainly a start.

Austin shifts his weight, and he grimaces at the rapidly cooling mess he's made of himself inside his underwear. He presses another short, firm kiss against Callum's lips, then pushes himself up with his hands braced on Callum's shoulders. "Stay here," he says. "Don't move."

He carefully slides off of Callum, legs wobbling as he grabs a fresh set

of clothes out of the open duffel bag that he assumes either Ashley or James had put together for him, slipping into the en-suite and cleaning himself up. By the time Austin comes back, Callum has tucked himself back in and rearranged his position on the bed, leaning back against the pillows with his legs sprawled out in front of him. His smile lights up the entire room when he sees Austin, arm stretched out to the side like he's holding space for Austin to nestle into.

Austin doesn't hesitate to climb in next to him, and Callum curls his arm around Austin's shoulder, dropping a kiss onto his temple as they settle together.

"Is this my sweater?" Callum asks, flipping the edge of the collar of the quarter-zip that Austin had thrown on without a second thought. "I thought I'd lost that ages ago."

"Oh, um," Austin stammers, cheeks warming under the weight of Callum's amused eyes. "Yeah. I found it stuck beside the washing machine?"

"Looks good on you," Callum says, voice low and appreciative, and Austin hides his face on Callum's chest. "I like it."

"I missed you," Austin admits. He said it before, but he needs to say it again. He doesn't think he can say it enough. He focuses on the lone freckle on Callum's neck, off-center underneath his Adam's apple, and swallows hard. Callum runs his hand up and down Austin's back, a touch that's so full of understanding that it hurts, because Austin has no idea what he did to deserve it. "I'm sorry."

Callum tips Austin's head back so he can look at him properly. His eyes are soft, clear-blue and overflowing with affection. Austin figures the only reason Callum thinks he's special has to be that he's never been able to meet himself before, because Austin doesn't feel like he holds a candle to how bright Callum shines.

From here on out, Austin is going to do his best to not take him for granted.

"You know, not running after you that night was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do," Callum says. His hand cups Austin's jaw, thumb tracing over the curve of his cheekbone. "And I've done a lot of really fucking hard things."

Austin's throat goes thick, tightening with remorse. He doesn't feel worthy of the devotion that Callum seems to have in unending wells.

He might not ever understand it—he might always wonder why Callum chose *him* to dedicate himself to, why he gets the privilege of being the recipient of Callum's staggering loyalty, but he's never been more thankful for anything in his life. He's going to return it back to Callum tenfold, going to spend every day making sure he's earned it.

The first step is going to be saying some of that out loud. Austin opens his mouth to speak, resolving to free his thoughts from where he normally keeps them trapped down inside his head, but Callum stops him with a soft smile.

"Can I talk first?" Callum asks, and Austin never wants to deny him anything else ever again, so he nods. "I know you think all of this is your fault," Callum says, "but it's important that you know it's not."

Austin frowns, wanting to protest. From the look Callum throws him, Callum knows that, too.

"It wasn't in my contract to stay with you," Callum tells him. "Like, that's not usually how things are done, at least not on the scale that had been arranged for you. But then you offered, and you were so earnest, and I—well, it wasn't in my contract to *not* stay with you, and even though I honestly knew that I shouldn't, I wanted to," he says. "My boss gave me so much shit for it, but somehow I convinced him that it was above board, that it was actually a good play."

"I, um," Austin says, still shamefaced at how oblivious he was. "I did figure that out, after they sent someone else. Had a real awkward moment at the end of their first day."

Callum flattens his lips together like he's trying not to laugh, and then turns onto his side to fully face Austin. Austin scoots up so they're nose to nose, sharing the pillow. "Oh, Austin," Callum sighs, reaching up to squeeze the back of Austin's neck.

Austin's answering smile is steeped in self-consciousness. "That was about when I really started to realize how much of an idiot I'd been."

"We both were," Callum says, pressing his forehead against Austin's. "The first time you tried to hold my hand, after dinner?" he continues. "I didn't want to stop you at all. I wanted to pull you in and kiss you properly, then take you home and do frankly unspeakable things to you. So when you explained, I should have said no. I knew it would come back to bite me, because I already knew how much I liked you, but I did it all anyway."

Austin's eyes widen, and he can't stop himself from asking, "The whole time?"

Callum grins, small and a little self-effacing, like *he's* embarrassed. "Yeah, Austin," he confirms. "The whole fucking time."

Austin laughs, a bright burst of disbelief that bubbles into something uncontrollable, making his body curl in on itself and taking his breath away. "God," he exclaims, once he finally settles down, wiping at the corner of his eyes. "We are so stupid."

Callum's smile radiates fondness, and Austin's already racing heart skips a beat. He still can't believe all of it's for him. He's not sure it's something he'll ever get used to. "So I've been told," Callum says, sheepish. "Several times over, actually."

And that's something Austin is definitely going to have to ask about later.

"But I felt—I don't know," Callum says. "I felt like I was almost taking advantage of you, right? Like I had all of these real feelings for you, and even when I thought it was obviously mutual, I couldn't be sure. You told me to pretend, and I wasn't, but who the fuck am I? You're you, so what was I supposed to believe?" he asks. "The part of me that wanted you, or the famous actor who told me it was all for show?"

"I was never acting," Austin confesses. "Not with you."

Callum closes what little distance remains between them and kisses Austin, slow and sweet, lips lingering. "I put as much together," Callum says when they pull apart for air. "Might've had a little help, but I got there eventually, too."

Austin takes a deep breath in. "I really hate that I left the way I did," he says. "And I will never stop being sorry for the things I said to you before I did. I was lashing out because I was hurt, but you didn't deserve any of it."

Callum slings an arm around Austin's waist, pulling him in until they're chest to chest. Their legs tangle together underneath the sheets, and the only thing that would make this moment better is if Austin could be doing it at home in his own bed, but wrapped up in Callum is the only place he wants to be, regardless of where that is.

"I thought things were good, you know? That we were starting to understand each other. I kept meaning to talk to you, to tell you that

it was real for me, but I kept avoiding it,” Austin says with a wry twist to his mouth. Callum squeezes his hip, gentle and encouraging, and Austin meets his eyes. “I was scared,” he reveals. “So I did what I always do—I overthought everything.”

Callum skims his hand up Austin’s back to thread his fingers through Austin’s hair. He scratches at Austin’s scalp, kneading at the tension that’s ever-present at the base of Austin’s skull. “Seems like an awfully tumultuous place, sometimes,” Callum says. “Your mind.”

Austin snorts. “That’s one way to put it.”

Callum keeps playing with his hair, switching back and forth between running his fingers through the strands and scratching at the roots, and Austin doesn’t ever want him to stop. He could close his eyes right now and fall asleep without even trying, and that’s something Austin hasn’t felt in a long time.

He still has more he needs to say, though, so he digs in and presses on.

“And then Josh was there—and that’s a long, entirely different story,” Austin says. He’s going to tell Callum all about it, but he doesn’t want to derail the conversation at hand. “But I couldn’t stop the guilt, you know? I hurt him, and I didn’t mean to or want to, but I still did.”

“Feelings are messy,” Callum shrugs, trying to assuage some of Austin’s turmoil. “And figuring shit out is hard. That doesn’t make you a bad person.”

“I wound myself into knots worrying that I was going to make the mistake twice, and then I went and did it all again anyway,” Austin sighs, chewing on the inside of his lip. He doesn’t want to be let off easy. He’s still—he’s pretty sure Josh wouldn’t answer the phone if Austin called, but he still wants to try. If Josh doesn’t want to, he’ll respect it, but he wants to make things right and finally put that part of his life to rest.

Callum pulls Austin’s lip out from where it’s caught between his teeth, just like he’d done in the hallway before things went bad. It’s strange to realize it’s only been a few weeks since that night, because it feels like forever ago now. Callum lightly traces over the curve of his mouth, and Austin presses a kiss to his fingertip, chest flooding with warmth when Callum smiles.

“If you want to have a competition on who has a bigger history of

being a dickhead, I should warn you that I'm *definitely* going to win," Callum says, eyebrows rising precariously high when he stresses the word, "so it would mostly be a waste of time." His face softens into something more serious, eyes locking onto Austin with intent. "The only thing that matters to me is what we're going to do now."

Austin has no idea how this man is real. "I care about you," he declares, simple and straightforward. "It's kind of terrifying how much I care about you, honestly. But I want this to work. I want it for real." He curls his lips into a grin, knee bumping out against Callum's. "I always wanted it for real, but this time I want both of us to know that."

Callum returns the smile, eyes crinkling at the corners. "Good, that's good," he says. "It's a coincidence, actually."

"Oh, yeah?" Austin asks, grin blooming until he's smiling so wide his face hurts. He's *giddy*, feels lighter than air, like if Callum wasn't holding him down he'd float away entirely. "How's that?"

"That's exactly what I want, too."

James calls late the next morning.

Austin is so sick of his phone that he wants to chuck it into the Pacific, and he takes a long moment to consider doing just that once his well-being no longer hinges on being immediately contactable.

Maybe he'll spend his next break on a remote island, or deep in the backcountry. Wherever he goes, he wants to be as far away from the rest of civilization as he can possibly get. If he never has to talk on the phone ever again, it will still be too soon.

"So," James announces in a lofty and magnanimous tone that immediately puts Austin at ease, because James wouldn't be putting it on if he were calling with bad news. "Do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

Austin leans into Callum's side, the curves of their body piecing perfectly together. They'd hunkered down in Ashley's guest room, shutting themselves off to the rest of the world as best as they could

without actually making Austin's dreams of going off-grid come true.

"Might as well start with the bad news," he says, tapping the call over to speaker so he doesn't have to hold it up for both of them to hear. "Callum's here, by the way."

"Oh, *Callum*," James says, dragging out the name into something suggestive. "Thought he wasn't your bodyguard anymore?"

"I'm not," Callum confirms, smirking down at Austin. He grabs Austin's hand and plays with his fingers, squeezing each knuckle one by one.

"And yet my body is feeling guarded just fine."

"Yeah, okay, keep it in your pants," James scoffs, and Austin can hear the exaggerated eye-roll in his voice. "So the bad news is that unbeknownst to you, you've been invoiced several thousand dollars thanks to me arranging some much-needed upgrades to your woefully out of date security system."

Callum's face pinches like he just sucked on a lemon. "You're saying you guys didn't check that out from the jump?"

"We had it inspected and were assured that it was functioning properly, which it was," James says. "What we *didn't* know at the time was that this particular model had a little-known backdoor override for those who have a specific kind of technical know-how."

"So what, my house was broken into with no one noticing because I was *hacked*?" Austin asks, full of disbelief that that's a thing that happens in real life.

"It's why we've been running around like chickens with our heads cut off for months, actually," James grouches, put-out. "It's all fucking beyond me, but you're biggest and bestest secret admirer was unfortunately some kind of technical wizard, and there was the most convoluted neverending matryoshka doll layers of spoofed IP addresses that meant every time the nerds who know better got close to pinning down an identity, they disappeared again like fucking dust in the wind."

Austin blinks, letting James' revelation sink in.

"Sure, okay," Callum says, sounding dubious of the whole thing, which pretty much summarizes everything Austin feels about it.

“What’s the good news?” Austin asks.

“Oh, well,” James says. “All the technical know-how in the world can’t help you if you’re caught red-handed at the scene of your crimes.”

Callum squeezes Austin’s hand in his and kisses the back of Austin’s wrist, and it’s like the press of his lips pulls a cord that unleashes a wave of relief throughout Austin’s body, rushing over him from head to toe.

It’s almost anticlimactic, getting the news while huddled under blankets in his best friend’s house with Callum a protective shield around him, but Austin thinks he’s had enough dramatics to last a lifetime.

“Who was it?” Austin asks, even though he honestly doesn’t really want to know. He’s spent too much time and wasted so much space in his mind on this. Whoever it is doesn’t deserve any more of his attention than they’ve already taken.

“Nobody,” James dismisses. For all that James is bombastic and can grind Austin’s gears, at the end of the day he *is* Austin’s friend, and sometimes James knows him better than Austin would like to admit. “Kept saying something about being your biggest fan, apparently? I’ll be sure to send them a dictionary to keep them company in jail.”

“Good fucking riddance,” Callum says when they end the call, staring off into the middle distance with a darkness in his eyes that Austin wants to smooth away.

They haven’t talked about it yet, but Austin knows Callum can’t stand that he wasn’t here when everything went down. He knows they still have a whole host of things to work through.

Austin wants to kick it all off with a fresh start.

“Cal?” Austin asks, tipping his chin up.

Callum’s attention immediately hones in on him, and it’s like everything else falls away. Nothing else matters, not a single fucking thing, except for the fact that Callum is here with him. “Yeah?”

Austin repeats Callum’s gesture, tightening his fingers where their hands are linked together. “Take me home?”

Callum smiles wide enough that he squints, eyes narrowing with the full force of his happiness, and Austin has missed him so fucking much that it physically hurts. "I thought you'd never ask."

Nothing about the house feels different.

Austin was worried that the second he stepped foot inside, everything would feel wrong. Tainted. A stranger had violated his safest space, had broken in before he'd even known to be wary and stolen both his things and his sense of security out from underneath his nose, and Austin was dreading the possibility that he would feel like he couldn't be here anymore.

The feeling never comes. It still feels like home, even more so now than it has in weeks now that Callum is back in it with him, strong and solid by Austin's side.

He guides Callum by the hand into his bedroom, walking backwards with his eyes locked on Callum the entire time. He doesn't want to look away, doesn't want to let Callum out of his sight ever again now that he knows what it's like to go without him.

Austin doesn't want to do that ever again.

The air around them is charged, heavy with heat and anticipation, but Austin still feels weightless. He feels a little fragile, like finely blown glass, but the light pouring out from Callum reflects off of his surface and floods the room with a soft glow. It's a forcefield, a protective barrier, enveloping all around them. Austin is convinced that as long as they're here, together, nothing else could ever possibly get to them.

Callum stops them before they reach the bed, hands closing around Austin's hips. They take turns stripping each other out of their clothes, divesting layers one by one until they're both reduced down to bare skin, and Austin isn't sure he's ever felt this fragile, but he knows with bone-deep certainty that he's never felt this safe.

Austin leans in, tilting his head to bring their mouths together. It's a slower kiss, sweeter than the rushed and reckless desperation of yesterday, and it makes Austin feel warm all over. Callum walks him backwards into the bed, and they tumble down in a tangle of limbs,

never once breaking the kiss.

“What do you want?” Callum asks when they finally have to come up for air, nosing at Austin’s jaw as they catch their breath.

Austin doesn’t know how to say *everything*, doesn’t know how to say that Callum’s already given Austin all he could ever hope to ask for and more. He turns his head and seals their lips back together, licking at the seam of Callum’s mouth until he opens up so Austin can taste his tongue.

“You,” Austin says into Callum’s mouth, opening his legs so Callum can fit better between his thighs. “Just you.”

It’s what Austin has wanted all along, from the second he laid eyes on Callum, leaning on Austin’s front door like he belonged there. It’s like something buried deep inside Callum knew before either one of them that he did, and Austin is so entirely overwhelmed with the knowledge that Austin gets to keep him.

He doesn’t have to let Callum go.

Callum kisses across Austin’s chest, hands sliding over every inch of him like Callum can’t decide where to touch first. It makes goosebumps rise on Austin’s skin, shivers rolling through his spine with every careful caress, every slow stroke and squeeze.

Austin looks down when Callum settles between his knees, breath ghosting hot over the length of him. His dick is hard, flushed pink and curving up against his stomach, and it twitches when Callum brushes his lips along the underside. Austin’s abs flex at the faint touch, and Callum grins, dropping an open mouthed kiss on Austin’s hip before working his way further down.

Callum wraps his arms around Austin’s thighs, spreading them wide and pulling him into his waiting tongue. Austin gasps at the first lick, warm and wet and tracing along his crease before circling around his hole. Callum flattens his tongue and swipes across his entrance with in one broad sweep, fingertips pressing indentations Austin’s thighs his when he flicks the tip of his tongue inside.

Austin moans as Callum gets him wet, spit dripping down his cheeks. Callum’s stubble scratches up his inner thighs, and Austin grinds down into his face, precum starting to dribble out of the tip of his dick and leaving it as shining as he’s sure his hole is by now.

Callum points his tongue and presses it against Austin's hole, fucking it inside inside him in a firm push. Austin's mouth falls open, no noise coming out as he rocks himself into it, Callum's nose rubbing back and forth over his taint.

"I bet I could make you come like this," Callum's voice rumbles out from between his thighs, breath puffing hot over his hole.

Austin twists, taking the opportunity to stretch out long to reach for his nightstand drawer. He slides it open and digs around blind, hand searching by feel for what he's looking for. He finds the lube first, pulling it out and tossing it in Callum's general direction, then his fingers close around a foil wrapper and he throws the condom over after it.

Callum is probably right, but Austin would rather find that out another time, and from the self-satisfied smirk on Callum's face when Austin sinks back into the mattress, Austin can count on finding out sooner rather than later.

Callum rises up to a full kneel as Austin lets his legs fall open, eyebrows rising expectantly when Callum flips open the lube and coats his fingers. Austin's dick is aching, weeping at the tip and begging for attention, but Callum slaps his hand out of the way when Austin goes to reach for it.

"Hands to yourself," Callum chides, leaning down to suck one of Austin's balls into his mouth, rolling it on his tongue.

Austin glares, but it's undercut by a breathy whine as Callum presses a finger up against his entrance, tonguing at his sac. "It's mine?"

"Not right now it isn't," Callum tells him, licking him from base to tip in a long stripe as he circles his finger, but doesn't push in. "It's mine."

Austin groans when Callum swirls his tongue over the head but still doesn't give him anything more. "Cal," he begs. "Come *on*."

"Well, that didn't take as long as I thought it would," Callum muses, but any rebuttal that Austin has dies on his lips when Callum swallows him down, tongue flattening on the underside of his cock as Callum slowly inches his finger inside him.

Austin goes hazy around the edges as Callum slides his finger in and out, seamlessly working from one to two as Austin melts under his touch. All of Austin's nerve endings are lit up, fireworks exploding

behind his eyelids when Callum grazes his fingertips over his prostate, and when Callum finds it he doesn't let up, rubbing deep inside Austin until his toes are curling and spine is arching, the slow stretch combined with the wet heat of Callum's mouth making a litany of unintelligible noises tumble out of his mouth.

"If you don't fuck me right now I'm going to—" Austin starts, gasping when Callum presses his fingers deeper instead of pulling out.

"Going to what?" Callum asks, looking up at Austin from in between his legs, an innocent smile on his face that Austin doesn't believe for even half a second.

"I'll do it *myself*, you absolute fucking tease," Austin bitches, punctuating the words by fucking himself back into Callum's fingers, grinding deep into his knuckles.

Callum slides his fingers out and crawls back up the bed, flattening his body over Austin's and pressing him deep into the mattress. He grabs ahold of Austin's wrists and stretches his arms up over head, and Austin meets his eyes with a challenging gaze.

"No," Callum says, dipping his head down to kiss him. He sucks Austin's bottom lip into his mouth, letting his teeth graze over it before he soothes it with his tongue. "Let me take care of you."

Austin's breath comes in shallow bursts, and he watches Callum through half-lidded eyes as he sits back on his heels and tears the condom wrapper open, cock sitting full and heavy between his legs. Austin's mouth goes dry, and he licks his lips when Callum pinches the end and rolls the condom all the way down to his base. His dick swings freely as he walks on his knees back between Austin's spread thighs, and Austin's completely captivated by the sight of him.

Callum slicks himself up and then guides the tip of his dick down to press against Austin's entrance, folding over Austin to brace a forearm behind his head. Austin sucks in a breath as the blunt head rubs against his hole, and it catches in his chest when Callum starts to push in.

Austin closes his eyes, his entire being narrowing down to the point where Callum is rocking into him, stretching him wide open. It's been too fucking long since Austin has felt like this, and with the way he's already so close to shattering into a million pieces, he's not even sure if he ever *has* felt like this.

He feels laid bare, exposed, but only because Callum already knows where all of his soft spots are. Callum wields the knowledge that could gouge into them, tearing into Austin's most vulnerable places. Austin doesn't think he ever will, but the fact that he *could* heightens all of Austin's senses, intensifying even the most tentative of touches.

Callum slides in deeper one breath at a time, filling Austin so completely that he's not sure that he'll ever be able to stand being empty again. He's spent too much time recently feeling hollow, but Callum is replenishing everything that's been drained out of Austin with every shallow thrust.

When Callum bottoms out, Austin trembles, on the precipice of collapsing or exploding, he has no idea which.

There's only one way to find out.

Austin bares down. "You gonna fuck me or what?"

Callum rises to the taunt, and Austin's eyes glaze over, vision whiting out when Callum pulls halfway out and then fucks into him in one hard motion. He maintains his pace, keeping a perfect and even rhythm in the roll of his hips, pounding into Austin until he's shaking apart at the seams.

"You're perfect," Callum says, panting into Austin's slackjawed mouth.

Austin surges up to kiss him, a messy tangle of tongues, hands fisted tight in Callum's curls. They kiss until Callum's hips start to stutter in irregular time, and Austin breaks away with a gasp.

"Touch me," Austin pleads, and he barely lasts more than a second once Callum reaches between them to get a hand on him, shooting off and painting Callum's chest with his release at the first touch.

Callum grunts as Austin clenches around him, body stiffening as his own orgasm rips into him. He fucks Austin through it, hips pumping at a gradually slowing pace until he's not doing much more than grinding against Austin, cock softening inside him.

Austin's chest heaves, and when Callum finally moves to pull out, Austin squeezes his thighs around Callum's waist, locking his ankles behind Callum's back and stopping him from going anywhere.

"Stay?" Austin asks, voice ragged and spent. "For a second."

“For as long as you want,” Callum tells him, hand lifting to cradle the side of Austin’s face.

Austin thinks forever sounds like a pretty good place to start.

Callum leans down to leave a kiss onto the curve of Austin’s left cheekbone, lips grazing feather-light and making Austin’s stomach flip. “I love these,” he says, nosing at Austin’s freckles before he kisses them again. “I like that they’re only one side,” he adds, punctuating the declaration with another precise peck. “Like a little constellation.”

Austin squirms under Callum’s ministrations, laughing when Callum doesn’t relent. He cranes his neck up and brings their mouths together again instead, wrapping his arms around Callum’s neck and pinning him in place.

Austin kisses him, a languid and lazy slide of their lips together. Austin kisses him, and even though his mouth is tender and swollen and his whole body feels scraped raw from Callum’s stubble, he never wants to stop. Austin kisses him, and kisses him, and kisses him, and he revels in the fact that he never, ever has to.

Chapter End Notes

and then at some point down the line, some up and coming indie director sends austin the most deep and full of gay yearning oscar-bait film script he's ever seen, specifically requesting him AND callum as leads, and austin somehow talks callum into doing it and they take the whole world by storm, the end :)

End Notes

fic post [here](#) on tumblr if you would like to share <3

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